

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

# CIAPHAS GAIN

## SAVIOUR OF THE IMPERIUM



**SANDY MITCHELL**

THE EMPEROR'S FINEST • THE LAST DITCH • THE GREATER GOOD



WARHAMMER  
40,000

# CIAPHAS CAIN

## SAVIOUR OF THE IMPERIUM



SANDY MITCHELL

THE EMPEROR'S FINEST • THE LAST DITCH • THE GREATER GOOD

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# CONTENTS

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| Cover                |  |
| Title Page           |  |
| Warhammer 40,000     |  |
| THE EMPEROR'S FINEST |  |
| One                  |  |
| Two                  |  |
| Three                |  |
| Four                 |  |
| Five                 |  |
| Six                  |  |
| Seven                |  |
| Eight                |  |
| Nine                 |  |
| Ten                  |  |
| Eleven               |  |
| Twelve               |  |
| Thirteen             |  |
| Fourteen             |  |
| Fifteen              |  |
| Sixteen              |  |
| Seventeen            |  |
| Eighteen             |  |
| Nineteen             |  |
| Twenty               |  |
| Twenty-one           |  |
| Twenty-two           |  |
| Twenty-three         |  |
| Notes                |  |
| THE LAST DITCH       |  |
| One                  |  |

Two  
Three  
Four  
Five  
Six  
Seven  
Eight  
Nine  
Ten  
Eleven  
Twelve  
Thirteen  
Fourteen  
Fifteen  
Sixteen  
Seventeen  
Eighteen  
Nineteen  
Twenty  
Twenty-one  
Twenty-two  
Twenty-three  
Twenty-four  
Twenty-five  
Twenty-six  
Twenty-seven  
Twenty-eight  
Twenty-nine  
Notes

## THE GREATER GOOD

One  
Two  
Three  
Four  
Five  
Six  
Seven

Eight  
Nine  
Ten  
Eleven  
Twelve  
Thirteen  
Fourteen  
Fifteen  
Sixteen  
Seventeen  
Eighteen  
Nineteen  
Twenty  
Twenty-one  
Twenty-two  
Twenty-three  
Twenty-four  
Twenty-five  
Twenty-six  
Twenty-seven

Notes

OLD SOLDIERS NEVER DIE

One  
Two  
Three  
Four  
Five  
Six  
Seven  
Eight  
Nine  
Ten  
Eleven  
Notes

THE SMALLEST DETAIL

THE LITTLE THINGS

A MUG OF RECAFF

About the Author  
A Black Library Publication

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



**CIAPHAS CAIN**

# **SAVIOUR OF THE IMPERIUM**

**Sandy Mitchell**



BLACK LIBRARY



[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



**It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the Master of Mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of His inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that He may never truly die.**

**Yet even in His deathless state, the Emperor continues His eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in His name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.**

**To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.**

# THE EMPEROR'S FINEST

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



*Editorial Note:*

*This selection from the Cain Archive is taken from a relatively brief, but far from uneventful, period of Cain's life, when he was attached to the command staff at brigade headquarters as an independent commissar. Reviewing the records of these half-dozen years, it's not hard to see why he arranged to be reassigned to a regiment on active service at the earliest opportunity, as even this would have seemed relatively safe in comparison to some of the assignments which came his way, a consequence of his unwanted reputation for heroism which he seems to have found both natural and inconvenient in the extreme. (A reputation which, true to form, he continues to insist throughout the current extract is completely undeserved. Many of my readers have taken this claim at face value, and many others have construed it as a rather engaging blindness to his own virtues. Having known him personally, I tend to the view that the truth is a little more complicated than either postulation.)*

*I have already disseminated several of his subsequent exploits with the Valhallan 597th, and see no need to recapitulate the circumstances of his finally getting his wish. Instead, I've chosen to concentrate on what may have been the pivotal incident of that period of his life, the consequences of which were to reverberate for decades to come. With hindsight, too, we can discern the first faint breath of wind destined to become a storm which threatened to engulf the entire Eastern Arm by the turn of the millennium.*

*I was also influenced in my choice of material by the reflection that this selection answers a number of questions raised and left open by some of the previous extracts I've edited and circulated among my fellow inquisitors, not least of which is the nature of his connection to the Reclaimers Astartes Chapter, and the circumstances surrounding his involvement in their ill-advised boarding of the space hulk Spawn of Damnation. Since the details of his appointment as Imperial Guard liaison officer to the Chapter, and his eventful journey to meet them, have been covered in one of the short extracts I've already disseminated, I've chosen not to repeat the material here, but to begin Cain's account of events with the Viridia Campaign itself.*

*As always, I've endeavoured to clarify matters where appropriate, by the use of footnotes and the interpolation of additional information by other hands, especially where Cain's habit of concentrating on the relatively trivial incidents which affected him personally threatens to lose sight of the bigger picture. The bulk of what follows, however, is unadulterated Cain, and as idiosyncratic as ever.*

*Amberley Vail, Ordo Xenos.*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



# ONE

It's not often I'm happy to find myself heading into a war zone as fast as the warp currents can carry me, but in the case of the Viridia Campaign I was prepared to make an exception. My journey there had been eventful, to say the least. Having taken passage on an Adeptus Mechanicus transport heading in roughly the right direction, I found myself fleeing for my life through a necron tomb world, which my hosts had been incautious enough to start poking around *en route*. If it hadn't been for the fortuitous arrival of a ship from the Reclaimers Adeptus Astartes Chapter, there would have been no survivors of the affair at all. As it was, I'd escaped by the skin of my teeth, and more luck than anyone has a right to expect. I don't suppose anyone will believe a word of it, though,<sup>1</sup> so I'll get on with a tale I can prove. As I doubt anyone's ever going to read these ramblings of mine, it's all academic in any case.

I can't say I remember much about my first few days aboard the strike cruiser *Revenant*,<sup>2</sup> but that's hardly surprising given the condition in which I boarded it. When I came to, it was to find myself in a spartan sanatorium, occupying a bed which seemed far too big for me, while faces I didn't recognise swam in and out of the mist which seemed to be hovering just in front of my eyeballs.

'Commissar,' a voice which sounded impossibly deep, rich and resonant asked. 'Are you awake?'

For a moment I doubted that, still comfortably insulated from reality by the pharmaceuticals cluttering up my bloodstream. To my drug-addled



mind, the voice sounded like that of the Emperor Himself, and I found myself wondering if I should have spent a bit more time in the temple, and a bit less in bars, gambling dens and bordellos, but it seemed a little late to be worrying about that now. If I had indeed arrived at the Golden Throne, I'd just have to hope its occupant was in a good mood, and try to steer the conversation on to safer ground at the earliest opportunity.<sup>3</sup> Then one of the indistinct faces swam close enough for me to focus on, and memory belatedly kicked in.

'I think so,' I husked, vaguely surprised by how thin my voice sounded. For a moment I wondered if it was due to disuse, and feared I'd been unconscious for weeks, but as my faculties began to trickle back, I realised that it simply sounded feeble in comparison to the one which had addressed me. Almost at once, memory followed, and I relived my desperate dive through the necron warp portal, and my arrival aboard their ship just in time to encounter a Space Marine boarding party. 'The metal creatures,' I asked urgently. 'Are they dead?'

'A debatable point,' one of the three giants surrounding me said, and smiled, in a somewhat unsettling manner. A mechanical claw, which looked as though it would have been more at home attached to a power loader, hovered behind his shoulder, in the manner of a tech-priest's mechadendrites.

The one looming over me shot him a reproving look and turned back to the bed I was lying on. Though thinly padded, it seemed damnably hard for an infirmary. 'You'll have to excuse Drumon's sense of humour, commissar. It's not always appropriate.' A hand as broad as a dinner plate slipped behind my shoulders and helped me to rise to a sitting position, bringing more of my surroundings into view. Gleaming metal surfaces, burnished like a drill sergeant's boots, were everywhere, making the place feel more like a Mechanicus shrine than a place of healing. If it hadn't been for the pervasive aroma of counterseptics, and the icon of the Emperor, in His aspect of the Great Healer, gazing at me sternly from the wall opposite, I might never have realised I was in a sanatorium at all. Most of the equipment I'd expect to see in such a place was absent, perhaps tidied away in the featureless metal lockers ranged against the wall, and what little there was still visible meant nothing to me. 'I'm Apothecary Sholer, of the Reclaimers. And in answer to your question, their vessel was destroyed.'

Which didn't exactly answer the question, of course, but it sounded good

enough to me at the time. (Knowing what I know now about the necrons, I wouldn't even have bothered to ask, but it was the first time I'd encountered them, don't forget. These days I wouldn't count them out if the entire planet they were standing on had been razed.<sup>4</sup>)

'Ciaphas Cain,' I said, inclining my head courteously and immediately wishing I hadn't. 'I believe I'm your new Imperial Guard liaison officer.'

'That's my understanding too,' the third giant said, speaking for the first time. Like the others, he was dressed in ceramite armour of a dull, off-white colour, with yellow gauntlets, although his was inlaid with a great deal more ornamentation than the suits of his comrades. He bowed his head. 'Captain Gries, commanding the Viridian Expeditionary Force. It appears your reputation was less exaggerated than we believed.'

'Indeed,' the Techmarine Sholer had introduced as Drumon said, his mechanical claw flexing slightly as he spoke. 'Few men could have escaped unscathed from a necron tomb world.'

'Hardly unscathed,' I said, suddenly remembering two of my fingers being ripped away by a glancing shot from the metal killers' hideous weapons. Nerving myself for the sight, I lifted my right hand into view, and found myself staring at a formless bundle of bandages, so bloated with padding that no shape hinting at whatever they might conceal could be discerned. As if being reminded of its existence had flicked a switch, I suddenly found my entire hand itching abominably.

'The augmetics are knitting in well,' Sholer assured me, as if I had the faintest idea what he was talking about. Before I could ask him, Drumon cut in again.

'You alone survived,' he said, 'when scores of your fellows perished. Two fingers seems a small price to pay.'

'If you put it like that,' I said, 'I'm forced to agree. I didn't even notice they'd gone until I was waving goodbye to the creatures in the tunnel.' The jest was feeble enough, I'll admit, but I was hardly at my best under the circumstances, and it did the job, which was to convince my listeners that I was modest about my so-called heroism. Time and again, I've found, the more I appear to be trying to play down my unmerited reputation, the more people seem to believe it.

Drumon seemed surprised at my flippancy, but agreeably so. His broad face, seamed with a faint tracery of scar tissue, widened for an instant with a barely perceptible smile, before returning to its previous immobility.

Gries didn't react at all, but returned to the point as though no one else had even spoken, with the single-mindedness of a servitor attempting to follow a simple set of instructions. 'I would like a full report of your experiences on Interitus Prime at your earliest convenience,' he said.

Technically, I suppose, I could have told him to keep his thinly veiled orders to himself, as the only people I answered to were the Commissariat, but that would hardly have been polite, or politic. I was going to have to work with him, or the people who reported to him, for quite some time, and putting his back up before we'd even officially begun wouldn't exactly help matters. Besides, I'd have to come up with something for General Lokris and his staff back at brigade headquarters, to explain how I'd managed to mislay an entire starship, and since both it and the expedition it carried had belonged to the Adeptus Mechanicus, I was pretty sure they'd be taking a keen interest in whatever I might have to say about it too.

There certainly didn't seem any harm in letting the captain of the Reclaimers have a copy as well; the wider I could spread my version of events, the less likely it seemed that anyone would be able to claim I'd been somehow culpable. (Which, for once, I hadn't been, just in the wrong place at the wrong time, as seems to have happened inordinately often during my long and inglorious career.) So I simply nodded again and tried to ignore the firecrackers going off behind my eyes as a result of the incautious movement.

'If someone could find me a slate, I'll get right on it,' I said. 'It's not as if I've got much else to do while I'm in here.'

As jobs of makework go, reliving the nightmare I'd so recently been through was hardly the most congenial I might have chosen, but as I progressed, I found myself setting out events with greater ease and more fluency, recalling them in greater detail than I'd expected. No doubt it helped that I had an unexpected ally in this endeavour, Drumon having taken it upon himself to debrief me, and making several visits to the quarters I'd been assigned on leaving the sanatorium for the purpose. As I recounted my experiences, he would ask questions about the equipment the tech-priests had been using to probe the ruins, and such blasphemous artefacts as I remembered seeing in the depths of the tomb world. I had no illusions about the fact that his interest lay in whatever technotheological insights I was able to provide, rather than my company, but as the voyage

progressed, our conversation gradually widened to encompass other topics, and I can't deny that he was rather more congenial than the other Adeptus Astartes I'd so far encountered.

I wasn't the only unenhanced human aboard, of course: in fact, the few dozen Reclaimers<sup>5</sup> were outnumbered three or four to one by the Chapter serfs who crewed the vessel. I found these servants tedious company at best, however, even more so than the skitarii I'd met aboard the *Ommissiah's Bounty*. Their reverence for the Space Marines they served seemed second only to their devotion to the Emperor, and, unused to the society of anyone outside their enclosed little world, they remained distantly polite, rebuffing any attempt at conversation with formal and strictly factual responses.

The one assigned to look after me, a youth named Gladden, was efficient, unobtrusive and unexceptionable, so much so that I found myself missing the presence of Jurgen more than I would have thought possible. True, my aide was a walking insult to the uniform of an Imperial Guardsman, who made the average ork seem fastidious and fragrant by comparison, but I'd learned to trust his dogged loyalty, and he'd become an invaluable bulwark against the more onerous aspects of my job. After some consideration, I'd decided to leave him back at brigade headquarters, however; partly because the notion of Jurgen in close proximity to the finest warriors the Imperium had ever produced made even my mind boggle, and partly because I'd got an inkling that Lokris had me earmarked for another assignment fit for the hero he fondly imagined me to be, and I wanted my aide in place to head it off with his usual obdurate refusal to deviate from protocol.

The upshot of which was that Drumon was the closest thing I was likely to find to a tolerable companion before we reached Viridia, and I found myself looking forward to his occasional visits. On the last occasion he dropped by my quarters he found me annotating a hardprint of my report with an inkstick, and the faint smile I'd seen a few times before drifted across his face.

'The new fingers appear to be satisfactory,' he said, a trace of pride entering his voice.

'They are indeed,' I agreed, laying the tedious job aside with a sense of relief and flexing my newly acquired augmetics. I still found their altered appearance a little disconcerting, but they'd started to feel like part of my own body at last, and I was able to grasp things again without looking to

make sure I'd judged the distance correctly instead of over- or under-reaching by a millimetre or two. Drumon, it transpired, had constructed them himself, collaborating with Sholer on their installation, so it seemed I had a lot to thank the Techmarine for. I nodded at the pile of papers. 'At least I got this finished before we left the warp,' I added.

'The brother-captain will be pleased,' Drumon said. As usual he remained standing, and seemed perfectly comfortable doing so. In my time with the Reclaimers I seldom saw any of the Adeptus Astartes sitting down, and when I did it was almost invariably for some practical reason, such as driving or riding in the back of a Rhino. 'There will be little time for paperwork when we reach Viridia.'

'I suppose not,' I agreed, pouring myself a much-needed measure of amasec. In actual fact I was planning to do as much file-shuffling as possible, in preference to visiting any of the battlefronts, but I wasn't about to admit that to one of the Emperor's finest.

As things were to turn out, though, the insurrection had continued to grow while we'd been transiting the warp, and by the time we arrived, notions like fronts and rear areas had ceased to have any military meaning at all. The entire system was one huge cauldron, seething with conflict, and we were about to drop into the middle of it.

'Have you found time to analyse the strategic review?' Drumon asked, and I nodded towards the data-slate on the desk beside me.

'I've skimmed it,' I admitted, which was the best anyone could have hoped for, and a great deal better than I normally managed with the briefing documents provided by the Munitorum. Usually, I found far more pleasant ways of spending my time aboard ship than wading through the turgid prose of Administratum drones, whose conclusions would invariably turn out to have been overtaken by events while we were transiting the warp in any case, but the *Revenant* was conspicuously lacking in recreational opportunities. 'Pacifying Viridia looks simple enough.'

At the time my confidence seemed more than justified. Rebellions in backwater systems like this one tended to be sparked by grievances against the planetary government rather than the Imperium itself, and the arrival of a few Guard regiments was usually enough to bring both sides to heel. So far as I could see, the situation hardly merited the deployment of the Astartes at all, and the Reclaimers would undoubtedly have found better uses for their time if it hadn't been for the fact that the Viridia System was a

major supplier of food and raw materials to the hive-worlds of the sector: unless the flow of tithes was restored in pretty short order they'd begin to suffer socially and economically in turn, leading to a wave of instability which, left unchecked, would drag down a dozen worlds within a decade. The manpower and resources required to deal with that would be incalculable.

'I concur,' Drumon said, with all the confidence I would have expected from one of the Emperor's chosen, and I must admit that I considered it more than justified. The average insurrectionist rabble wouldn't last five minutes against a couple of dozen Guardsmen, let alone the genetically enhanced Space Marines. He might have been about to say more, but the familiar disorientating sensation of a starship slipping through the barrier separating the material universe from the warp swept over me at that point, leaving both of us disinclined to further conversation.

'I don't suppose I'll ever get used to that,' I said, little knowing at the time how far and frequent my travels were to become in the ensuing years, to the point where I was able to shrug off the lingering nausea almost at once. On this occasion, however, I was more than grateful for the amasec I'd poured a few moments before, and drained the goblet in a couple of swallows.

I was just beginning to feel relatively normal again when the lights flickered, and a faint tremor ran through the deck plates beneath my feet. Memories of my experience aboard the *Hand of Vengeance* a few years before sent my heart racing, and I was already reaching for my weapons when, after listening to the comm-bead in his ear for a moment, Drumon told me what I'd already deduced for myself. 'We appear to be under attack,' he said.



*Editorial Note:*

*Since, as usual, Cain only gives the most cursory background to the events he's describing, here seems as good a place as any to insert a more objective overview of the Viridia Campaign at the point he entered it.*

From *The Virus of Betrayal: The Cleansing of Viridia and its Aftermath* by Lady Ottaline Melmoth, 958.M41.

It's undoubtedly fair to say that the first few months of what was to become the Viridian Insurrection gave few clues as to the scope of the chaos and carnage to come. What had begun as a wave of popular protest against the mooted imposition of a two per cent tax on incense and votive candles by the Administratum erupted into violence in several provinces almost simultaneously. With hindsight, of course, we can see how carefully events were orchestrated, from the moment an agent of the conspiracy first slipped the controversial measure into the fiscal projections for the following year. Despite the protestations of the planetary governor that he'd never seen the proposal, and certainly wouldn't have approved it if he had, a large section of the population laid the blame for it squarely at his door, some even going so far as to begin calling him 'Alaric the Heretic' (a nickname which the poor man remains saddled with even today, albeit now in jest).

How much of the Ecclesiarchy's predictable condemnation of the so-called 'tax on piety' was spontaneous, and how much the result of infiltration of their ranks, we can only conjecture, but there's no denying the outrage with

which the average Viridian in the thoroughfare reacted. We've always been proud to call ourselves an Emperor-fearing folk, and the prospect of being unable to afford to maintain the tiny shrines which grace even the humblest hovel, or to do so only at the expense of starvation and destitution, a choice many of our poorest citizens would undoubtedly have made, was all but intolerable to most of the proletariat.

In vain, Governor DuPanya pledged that he personally would make sure that the proposed legislation was never enacted. By the beginning of 928, the 'piety tax' had become a rallying point for malcontents of all kinds, united only in their dislike of the planetary government. After the initial riots had been suppressed by the Guardians,<sup>6</sup> backed up by elements from the Planetary Defence Force in a few cases, the inevitable casualties among the civilian population became the focus of fresh resentment, and the wave of unrest intensified. With what seemed at the time to be astonishing rapidity, but which with hindsight is clearly the result of careful coordination by the shadowy enemy whose existence as yet no one even suspected, Viridia became all but ungovernable, and Governor DuPanya was left with no choice but to appeal to the Imperial Guard for help.

Help was not slow in coming, but the distance between stars is a vast one, and many agonising months were to pass before the vanguard of the relief force arrived in our system. To the joy and astonishment of all loyal Imperial citizens, the vessel was no Imperial Guard troopship, but a battle-barge<sup>7</sup> of the Astartes, bearing not only the matchless warriors of the Space Marines, but Commissar Cain, the hero whose exploits against the orkish invaders of Perlia had inspired billions across the sector.

As fate was to have it, however, no sooner had the *Revenant* re-entered the materium than it was treacherously attacked, the anarchy which had by then overwhelmed our home world having spread to engulf the void stations and mining habs scattered throughout the system.





## TWO

Having no better plan in mind, I followed Drumon to the bridge. If necessary, I was prepared to argue that my position as liaison officer made it my business to remain abreast of any unexpected developments, although to be honest I just thought that would be the best place to find out what in the Throne's name was going on. I've been involved in a fair number of space battles in my time, far more than any Guardsman has a right to expect, and in all too many of them the only thing I could do was sit there and wait for the troopship to take a hit. At least on the bridge you can watch events unfolding in the hololith, which introduces a curious kind of detachment into the proceedings, as the contact icons go through their stately dance of life and death.

In the event, however, no one challenged my right to be there, which came as a welcome surprise. In fact, the only thing which surprised me more was that until Drumon arrived, there were no Astartes on the bridge at all.

'Techmarine.' The vessel's captain, who for some reason rejoiced in the title of shipmaster,<sup>8</sup> vacated his control throne and inclined his head respectfully. (Not something the Navy would appreciate, having the man in charge abandon his duty for the sake of protocol in the middle of a battle, but the Space Marine Chapters, as I was already beginning to grasp, have a different perspective on things. Quite how different I wouldn't fully understand for a few more decades, however.)

'Carry on, shipmaster.' Drumon acknowledged the greeting with a barely perceptible nod of his own, and the shipmaster resumed his seat, absorbed

again at once in the flurry of information blizzarding across his pict screen. One of the control stations ranged about the hushed and dimly lit chamber, through which the muted chanting and clouds of incense from the tech-adepts servicing the targeting systems drifted, remained vacant, and as the towering figure of the Techmarine took his place before it, I realised that it was placed higher than the others, where a standing man more than two metres tall could work at it comfortably. The other lecterns were manned by Chapter serfs in uniforms similar to those of the Imperial Navy, although their insignia were different, no doubt reflecting their affiliation and status in some manner I couldn't be bothered to enquire about at the moment.

'What's happening?' I asked, and Drumon glanced briefly in my direction as though surprised to be reminded of my presence, his gauntleted fingers continuing to rattle the keys of the data lectern. A blizzard of images, changing too rapidly for me to assimilate, danced across his face, reflected from the display in front of him.

'We have sustained only minimal damage,' he assured me, which came as a tremendous relief. The last time I'd been aboard a vessel under fire I'd ended up breathing vacuum, fortunately for no more than a handful of seconds, although it had seemed a great deal longer to Jurgen and I. The *Revenant* was made of sterner stuff than the venerable troopship which had delivered me to Perlia, however, being designed to be capable of holding her own against a ship of the line, and the voices around me were reassuringly calm.

'Who from?' I persisted, and if Drumon was irritated at all, he was too polite to show it. By way of reply he activated a nearby pict screen, and I found myself looking at a slightly blurred image of a System Defence corvette.

'Viridian vessel, this is the strike cruiser *Revenant*, of the Reclaimers Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes,' the shipmaster said, his voice clipped. 'Break off and surrender, or be destroyed in the name of the Emperor.'

'They're turning,' one of the vassals said, his voice equally matter-of-fact. 'Looks like another attack run.'

'Gunnery stations stand by,' the shipmaster said, then glanced at Drumon for approval.

The Techmarine nodded again. 'All weapon batteries charged and ready,' he assured the crew, his voice carrying easily to every corner of the bridge.

'Fire when ready,' the shipmaster said, his voice as calm as if he'd just

ordered a mug of recaf. 'Wait for a positive lock.' The seconds stretched unbearably, the image of the attacking vessel growing ever larger on my screen, until I expected to see ravaging beams of energy lancing out from it with every heartbeat.

'Target acquired,' another of the bridge crew said, seeming equally relaxed, and I finally realised that it was Drumon's presence which was making them so dispassionately efficient. Nobody wanted to be the one to let the crew down in front of their masters, so they were all doing it by the book, instead of cutting corners and giving way to impulsive profanity like the Guard troopers I was used to herding so often did when the las-bolts started flying.

A moment later the attacking corvette broke apart, like a seedhead on the wind, as our starboard batteries tore the guts out of it, to leave a slowly dissipating cloud of debris drifting apart in the void.

'Who were they, though?' I asked, not really expecting an answer, but the auspex man answered me anyway.

'The IFF beacon tagged it as the *Lady Helene*, one of the local System Defence boats.'<sup>9</sup>

'Then they ought to have been on our side,' I said, beginning to feel that matters weren't going to be quite so simple after all. If part of the SDF had mutinied, then the chances were that a substantial proportion of their counterparts in the PDF had followed suit (or, more likely, led by example).

'Acknowledged,' Drumon rumbled, and for a moment I thought he'd responded to my comment, before I realised that he'd probably been too busy listening to the voice in his comm-bead to have even heard it. 'I will inform the commissar.'

'Inform me of what?' I asked, already more than half-convinced that I didn't want to know. His first words were enough to tell me I was right about that.

'The situation has deteriorated significantly,' he said, with commendable restraint. 'According to our signal intercepts, a state of civil war now exists throughout the system.'

'Frakking great,' I said, seeing little need to restrain myself under the circumstances. 'Does Captain Gries have any suggestions for dealing with it?'

I'd got to know Drumon well enough by now to be fairly confident that the expression which ghosted across his face was one of faint surprise that I'd

even bothered to ask. 'Intervene at once,' he said, then broke off to listen to a voice in his earpiece. 'He is embarking in the hangar deck as we speak, and extends an invitation for you to join him.'

Not, needless to say, an invitation I could even consider refusing. I was there to liaise with the Reclaimers' command staff, which basically meant Gries, so wherever he went, I had to go too. At least until the Imperial Guard forces turned up, and I could find some plausible excuse to go and bother them instead.

'I'd be delighted,' I said, hoping I sounded as though I meant it.

I'd arrived aboard the *Revenant* by teleporter, and been unconscious at the time into the bargain, so this was my first sight of the warship's hangar bay. My immediate impression as I walked through the airtight hatch, which slid closed behind me with a squeal of metal against metal, was one of purposeful activity. The inevitable crowd of Chapter serfs was bustling about under the supervision of a handful whose bearing and demeanour betokened higher rank than their fellows, even though the iconography of their uniforms continued to be strange to me. A startling number of them had visible augmetics, which either indicated a fair degree of hazard in their occupations (even by the standards of serving aboard a warship), or the kind of willingness to voluntarily adopt whatever enhancements would assist their work I'd previously encountered only among the Adeptus Mechanicus. I suspected the latter, as I'd gathered from the skitarii aboard the *Omniassiah's Bounty* that some kind of pact existed between the Reclaimers and the acolytes of the Machine-God, but there was no time to think about that now. Gries and his entourage were clearly visible in the distance, towering over the surrounding crewmen, and I set off across the echoing metal plain between us as quickly as possible.

Like every hangar I'd ever been in, the chamber was vast, but the very scale of it felt curiously comforting; for the first time since coming aboard I felt a measure of relief from the nagging sense of strangeness I'd experienced everywhere else about the vessel, whose corridors and hatchways had been designed to accommodate the greater-than-human bulk of Space Marines, and left me feeling curiously shrunken. Unlike the docking bays I'd passed through while embarking and departing from troopships, however, the vast space felt clinically efficient. All the apparatus required to refuel and rearm the pair of Thunderhawks currently

occupying it was neatly stowed, and there was a marked absence of cargo pallets and other detritus cluttering up the place.

The Thunderhawks were impressive enough, too, and I slowed my pace a little as I neared the closer of them. They weren't as large as the platoon-sized drop-ships the Guard routinely used, let alone the company-sized behemoths I'd ridden in on occasion, but their blocky solidity looked immediately reassuring. Their heavy armour could doubtless soak up a lot of incoming fire, and they seemed more than capable of dishing it out as well as taking it, judging by the amount of ordnance I could see hanging off their airframes. They were painted yellow and white, like the armour of the Astartes marching up the boarding ramp of the one I was approaching, their simultaneous footfalls echoing off the metal mesh like drumbeats, and looked as fresh as if they'd just been rolled out for the first time. Having gathered a little of how much tradition meant to a Space Marine Chapter, I had no doubt that they were considerably more venerable than they appeared, perhaps even centuries old, but their immaculate condition was a tribute to Drumon and the serf engineers he supervised. It heartened me, too, I have to admit, as I found it hard to conceive of an enemy capable of standing against such a formidable vessel.

I trotted up the ramp in the wake of the power-armoured giants ahead of me, and found myself in a passenger compartment constructed on the same cyclopean lines as everything else sized for Astartes. Only about half of the seats were occupied, and I scrambled into one of the empty ones, feeling oddly like a child in an adult's armchair as I fumbled with the crash webbing. My feet hung awkwardly above the deck plates, and I was unable to draw the webbing quite as tight as I would have wished, but at least I had room for my chainsword without having to remove it from my belt, as would have been the case aboard an Imperial Guard landing barge.

'Commissar.' Gries's helmet turned in my direction, easy to identify, as it was as richly ornamented as his armour and surmounted by a crest of green and black. 'Are you prepared?'

'By the Emperor's grace,' I replied, falling back on one of the stock responses which I generally used to avoid committing myself, and feeling it wouldn't hurt to look a bit more pious than usual surrounded by so many paragons. There were fifteen of them in all: Gries's command squad, which I was pleased to see included Sholer, his narthecium ready for use on his left vambrace, and ten tactical troopers, already broken down into two

combat squads. Most carried bolters, which I was more used to seeing mounted on armoured vehicles, as easily as a Guardsman handled his lasgun, while two of their comrades were equipped with heavy weapons it would have taken a team of ordinary troopers to use effectively on the battlefield. One carried a missile launcher, several reloads pouched at his waist, while another casually hefted the first man-portable lascannon I'd ever seen without a groundmount. The faceplates of their helmets were all the same yellow as their gauntlets, although the captain's shone with the lustre of gilding rather than pigment.

'May He watch over us all,' Gries intoned in response, although, to my surprise, he made the cogwheel gesture I generally associated with members of the Adeptus Mechanicus rather than the sign of the aquila.

I didn't have much time to think about that, though, because the boarding ramp was retracting, and the engines fired up to a pitch which left my ears ringing. It might have been fine for the Space Marines, whose heads were cocooned inside their helmets, but it was distinctly uncomfortable for me. There was no point complaining about it, however, even if anyone could have heard me, so I just pulled my cap down as far as it would go, and quietly resolved to get hold of some earplugs before I accepted another lift in a Thunderhawk.

'Look in the locker to your left,' the nearest Reclaimer said, his words just about audible over the howling of the engines, even amplified by the vox built into his helmet. With some difficulty I followed his suggestion, since everything was laid out for far longer arms than mine, and discovered a comms headset with padded earpieces and a vox mic on a stalk. I donned it gratefully, and found the noise almost instantly reduced to a level I considered bearable.

'Thank you,' I responded, feeling faintly foolish.

'This is our primary objective,' Gries said, activating a pict screen. It seemed someone on his staff had been busy in the relatively short time since our arrival in-system, and had managed to gather a remarkable amount of information. 'Fidelis, the planetary capital, currently being fought over by three of the major rebel factions. The loyalist forces are dug in around the Administratum cloister, the cathedral precincts, the Mechanicus shrine and the governor's palace, no doubt hoping the rebels will whittle one another down for them.' The landmarks he'd indicated flared green on the map. 'We'll deploy from the palace. If we can assure the

safety of the governor, then the Emperor's rule should be swiftly restored.'

I found myself nodding in agreement – always assuming the man was still alive, of course. If he wasn't, and had been inconsiderate enough to expire without leaving a clear line of succession, the resulting confusion as conflicting claimants brawled for the throne would probably make things ten times worse.

'I take it you have good reason to believe he's still in charge,' I said, more to show I was paying attention than anything else. Gries's helmet dipped in almost imperceptible acknowledgement.

'He made a pictcast five hours ago, appealing for calm and promising retribution against all who continued to defy the Emperor's will. The rebels responded as one might expect.'

'Shelling the palace?' I asked, and the captain's helmet inclined again.

'Given the amount of damage the building has already sustained, we can infer that he managed to survive the latest bombardment with little difficulty.' He adjusted the image on the pict screen, and the palace and its grounds rushed towards us, filling the frame. Either the *Revenant* carried some of the most sophisticated long-range sensors I'd ever come across, or Drumon had managed to gain access to the PDF's orbital net, because according to the time stamp in the corner the image was a current one. The palace itself showed signs of extensive damage, an entire wing burned out and roofless, while the rest of the structure was pocked with the stigmata of heavy ordnance. The perimeter walls, which had been designed with this sort of contingency in mind, had evidently withstood several assaults already, and been shored up or strengthened in a few places, although, to my relief, I couldn't see any actual breaches. The muddy wasteland separating the two, what had presumably once been formal gardens, was criss-crossed with trenches and the tracks of armoured vehicles, several dozen of which could be seen parked around the place. That was good news, if nothing else, as it meant there would be a substantial garrison of PDF loyalists to hide behind if, by some inconceivable quirk of fate, I was to run out of Space Marines.

Gries highlighted an open area between the trench line and the building, which common sense and experience told me had to be covered by emplaced weapons from at least two directions. 'This is our landing zone,' he said. 'My team and the commissar will present our compliments to Governor DuPanya, while Sergeant Trosque's squad will move out at once

to ensure the safety of the cathedral and the shrine of the Ommissiah.'

The sergeant, who I'd already picked out by virtue of the chainsword scabbarded at his hip, opposite the holster of his bolt pistol, made no visible sign of acknowledgement, but his voice responded at once. 'One combat squad should suffice for each objective. Mine will safeguard the shrine, Veren's the cathedral.'

'What about the Thunderhawk?' I asked, hoping the answer would be something to the effect of it staying on the ground with its engines running in case we needed a rapid dustoff, but knowing this was extremely unlikely.

'Seek and destroy,' Gries said, which made perfect sense. With the local loyalists dug in at four known enclaves, pretty much anything else that looked military would be renegade units, attached to one or other of the squabbling factions, and fair game for the circling gunship. 'Let the rebels know we've arrived.'

Given the amount of firepower I'd seen while boarding, that was hardly going to be difficult. I nodded, with every outward sign of approval. 'Might as well start as we mean to go on,' I agreed.

Gries manipulated the controls of the pict screen again, and the image changed to an external view, relayed from part of the fire control system judging by the targeting graphics superimposed on it. We were still at high altitude, but undeniably within the atmosphere.<sup>10</sup> As I watched, transfixed, the smoking ruins of Fidelis rolled over the horizon, and I found myself trying to pick out the landmarks Gries had highlighted during his briefing. The cathedral was the easiest, still dominating the quarter in which it stood, despite the tumbled ruins of most of its spires. With that to orientate me, I was soon able to pick out the blank-sided slabs of the Administratum ziggurat, and the burnished steel cladding of the Mechanicus shrine. The governor's palace was another matter, however, less tall than the others and still some distance away, surrounded by a cluster of lesser mansions and their grounds, like a she-grox with young. As we grew closer, it became evident that many were burned out, and all had been pillaged, in a manner which put me in mind of mob violence rather than battle damage.

Then the pall of smoke cleared, and we skimmed over the outer wall of the palace grounds, too fast to be targeted by ground-to-air fire, the upturned faces of guards and besiegers alike identical masks of astonishment.<sup>11</sup> Abruptly, I found myself pressed hard against the crash webbing, as the pilot kicked in the retros, killing our forward momentum, then my stomach



seemed to float free of my body as we dropped towards the ground. It was just as well Jurgen wasn't with me, I thought, as he was prone to airsickness at the best of times, and this was hardly one of those. Without warning, an ork-sized boot seemed to kick me in the fundament, and the noise of the engines died back to almost bearable levels. We were down.

'Prepare to disembark,' Gries said, as the ramp began to drop, letting in a swirl of damp air, lightly scented with burning vegetation from the heat of our landing thrusters. Trosque's fire-team<sup>12</sup> deployed first, jogging down the ramp and securing it; I was pleased to see that they were taking nothing for granted, even though we were supposed to be meeting allies. After a moment the sergeant assured us that all was well, and Gries and his command squad followed. Seeing no reason to delay any further, and convinced that if there was treachery afoot there could be no better place to discover the fact than from behind a solid wall of bolter-carrying ceramite, I trotted after them, trying to look as imposing as I could given that my head barely came up to the level of their pauldrons.

As my bootsoles hit solid ground, crunching a little on the ashes and baked mud which still smoked gently beneath the Thunderhawk, I got a lungful of smoke and tried to suppress the reflex to cough. No one else was, and I didn't want to be the one to undermine the dignity of the occasion.

As Gries stepped off the bottom of the ramp, he paused for a moment, two of his companions at either shoulder and an exact pace behind. Taken briefly by surprise, I stopped too, just short of walking into the back of him, and level with the other four Astartes, completing the line, and, of course, completely invisible from the front.

'Welcome to Viridia,' someone said, and I shuffled sideways a little to get a better view. We were evidently expected, as a delegation had come to meet us: ceremonial troopers, their gaudy uniforms looking rather the worse for wear by now, who held their lasguns like men who'd recently discovered exactly what they were for, and were ready to employ them in an instant, surrounding a man in robes so ridiculously over-ornamented there could be little doubt as to who he was, even before he announced the fact. 'I'm Governor DuPanya.' Then, to my astonishment, he went down on one knee. 'You honour us by your presence.'

'Please rise,' Gries said, the vox system of his helmet, perhaps mercifully, purging any traces of surprise or amusement from his words. 'We have much to discuss, and little time to waste on ceremony.' He reached up,

removing the helmet, and DuPanya relaxed visibly as the captain's face came into view. It wasn't exactly a hololith, consisting as it did mainly of augmetics and scar tissue, but it looked a great deal more friendly than a blank visage of pitted ceramite. 'I am Captain Gries of the Reclaimers Chapter, these are my battle-brothers and this...' he turned, apparently surprised to find me so close to hand, 'is Commissar Cain, our liaison with the Imperial Guard elements of the task force.'

'Imperial Guard?' DuPanya asked, standing up as he'd been bidden and giving me my first proper look at him. He appeared to be in early middle age – although I was too familiar with the nobility's fondness for juvenat treatments, even on a backwater world like this one, to put much faith in outward appearance – and running slightly to fat. His eyes, however, were keen and looked at me appraisingly. 'I was not informed of their arrival.'

'They're still in the warp,' I told him, reflecting somewhat ruefully that I could have saved myself a considerable amount of inconvenience if I'd delayed my departure to travel with them, and whatever piece of gung-ho idiocy Lokris had been planning to drag me into could hardly have turned out to be worse than the metal abominations I'd barely escaped with my life from on Interitus Prime. 'Emperor willing, they should be here within the week.' In fact they should be there within the next couple of days, if the warp currents hadn't shifted appreciably since the last estimate I'd heard, but nothing to do with the Realm of Chaos itself is ever certain, and I preferred to err on the side of caution. I raised my voice a little, above the scream of the Thunderhawk's engines, which were powering up again now that Veren's team had disembarked behind us. 'But perhaps this isn't the best place to be discussing operational matters.'

'Quite so,' Gries agreed, his voice cutting through the din as though it were little more than the murmuring of wind through the trees. 'Having come here to ensure your safety, it seems a little unwise to be talking where the enemy could deny us our objective with a lucky mortar round or a sniper's bullet.' This didn't seem to have occurred to the governor, who, to his credit, seemed relatively unconcerned at the possibility. Nevertheless, he turned and led the way inside, his escort looking considerably relieved as they regained a little hard cover. Gries and his entourage followed, while I oscillated between the two parties, connected to both by ties of protocol, but properly part of neither.

As we reached the heavy wooden doors of the palace and passed inside, I

glanced back at the Thunderhawk, which was rising from the ground like a raptor in search of prey. Beneath it, Trosque and Veren were leading their sections towards the perimeter wall in diverging directions, as each made for the gate closest to his objective, and I breathed silent thanks to the Throne that I'd be well under cover before the serious shooting started. I had no doubt that the Astartes would make short work of any traitors standing between them and their targets, but the initial contact for both teams would be close enough for us to attract any collateral damage that might be going.

Well, perhaps the Thunderhawk could help clear the path for them. It circled lazily over our heads one final time, then roared away to find something to shoot at.

Watching it go, I felt a faint sense of unease, reflecting that, for better or worse, I was now committed to the defence of this beachhead, with nowhere to go unless it was through the enemy. Then reason kicked in, and reassured me that I must be as safe here as anywhere on Viridia. After all, the palace hadn't fallen yet, and it had now been reinforced by five of the most formidable fighters in the Imperium. Plus me. I should be able to avoid trouble here, surely.



*Editorial Note:*

*Cain has alluded in passing to the subsector-wide importance of Viridia, but knowing a little more about the world, and the system of which it is a part, makes it abundantly clear why its pacification was important enough to warrant the deployment of an Astartes expeditionary force. The following extract is almost as idiosyncratic as Cain's own prose, but serves its purpose of filling in sufficient background to clarify much of what follows without sacrificing readability to pedantry. Anyone wanting greater detail is referred to the Compendium of Tithings of the Damocles Gulf and Bordering Regions (Abridged), Volume MCLXXIV, appendices 17, 2,378 and 3,452,691, which may be consulted at any Administratum archive, once the appropriate requests have been filed in triplicate. Eventually.*

From *Interesting Places and Tedious People: A Wanderer's Waybook*, by Jerval Sekara, 145.M39.

The agriworld of Viridia lies a little to spinward of the more populous regions of the Damocles Gulf, but can be reached surprisingly easily, due to the large volume of traffic to and from the neighbouring hive-worlds. This makes it a useful stopover point, since passage there, and to whatever eventual destination the wayfarer may settle upon once its decidedly bucolic charms have begun to pall, may be easily obtained.

It is, however, worth a brief sojourn, as it manages to combine both rural simplicity and urban sophistication in a manner which, if not unique, is

certainly uncommon in this part of the Imperium. In part, this is due to the sheer volume of shipping, since enterprising grain barge captains compete energetically with one another to wring some kind of profit from the inward leg of their journeys, ensuring a steady supply of offworld merchandise of a variety almost unparalleled elsewhere in the subsector. As the local saying has it, if you can't find it on Viridia, it probably doesn't exist.

All of which has made the world itself tolerably prosperous, with a thriving mercantile class, who, in the manner of parvenus everywhere, fritter away their profits on grandiose architecture and philanthropic enterprises intended to better the lot of the artisans, whether they want it bettered or not. As a result, the planetary capital, Fidelis, is positively awash with grand public buildings, ornamented to within an inch of their lives and separated by a profuse scattering of parks and gardens. The local populace is hardworking and pious, to such an extent that almost every street contains a chapel or shrine to the Emperor. Notwithstanding, they throw themselves into any excuse for a celebration wholeheartedly, with the annual festivals dedicated to some aspect or other of the agricultural cycle being particularly popular. The epitome of ecclesiarchial architecture, however, must surely be the cathedral in Fidelis, which in size and splendour can rival those to be found on far more populous worlds, and which attracts pilgrims from all over the Viridia System.

For, unlike most other agriworlds, Viridia exports a great deal more than just foodstuffs. The rest of the planetary system of which it is a part is exceptionally rich in minerals, and millions of its citizens live offworld, in orbitals, void stations and mining habs, dedicated to harvesting this bounty as assiduously as their pitchfork-wielding cousins on the surface do theirs. In fact, it's no exaggeration to say that around half the total Viridian population have never set foot on the planet they nominally call home, and never will. The raw material they gather is dispatched to the manufactoria of the neighbouring systems in a never-ending stream, slaking the hunger of their production lines just as efficiently as the grain barges do the workers who labour thereon.



## THREE

DuPanya and his bodyguard led us through the palace at a rapid pace, down carpeted corridors lined with tapestries and through wooden-floored galleries, whose polished surface fared badly under the heavy stride of the Space Marines; the rich, warm sheen of generations of waxing, scuffing and splintering wherever they set foot. The deathmasked faces of the governor's ancestors stared down disapprovingly from the walls at this casual vandalism, although DuPanya didn't seem to mind much, or even notice; after all, the damage was slight enough, compared to the devastation the rebel artillery had already wrought on his home.

The Astartes seemed equally indifferent, walking in the same synchronised fashion I'd noticed before among their comrades; each left foot striking the floor at exactly the same time, then the right, with the precision of servitors. Every time they took a step, the floor shuddered under the combined impact, and I felt the shock of it travelling up my legs, to the point where I began to feel as though I was aboard some slightly unstable watercraft. Fortunately, the sensation was relatively short-lived, as, before long, the wooden floor gave way to bare rockcrete, the walls roughly finished in the same material, and I realised we were now in a bunker beneath the palace itself. As we descended several levels, I found my unease diminishing; this hidden redoubt had survived innumerable artillery bombardments unscathed, and would undoubtedly continue to do so. It was, therefore, with something approaching a light heart that I stepped through a pair of reinforced blast doors, currently propped open by a brace of guards in the

same comic opera uniforms as their compatriots, who at least had the grace to pull themselves into a semblance of attention as we passed them, to find myself in a reasonably well-equipped command centre.

Dragging my attention from the solid buttresses and thick ceiling protecting us, I caught intermittent glimpses of pict screens and data lecterns between the towering figures in power armour which blocked most of my view, but could make out little until they fanned out, indicating that we'd reached the operational area at last.

'Governor.' A middle-aged man in a rather more practical uniform than the ones we'd seen so far, resembling standard Imperial Guard fatigues, mottled in greys and mid-blues,<sup>13</sup> looked up from the hololith which dominated the centre of the space. A faintly flickering image of the city was being projected in it, spattered with icons I was fairly certain marked the positions of friendly and enemy troops. 'The Astartes are assaulting the enemy outside the east and north-western gates.' If he was surprised to see me or my companions he gave no sign of the fact, merely nodding a preoccupied greeting in our direction, and I decided I liked him, whoever he was. Either he was keeping his mind on the business of defending our enclave, or he'd simply decided he was damned if he was going to look impressed by us, a game I knew well and always enjoyed playing myself.

Gries nodded, no doubt being kept up to date with his men's progress by monitoring systems built into his armour, and I began to regret discarding the bulky headset I'd been wearing before we left the Thunderhawk. It had been heavy and awkward, true, having been designed for a head far larger than mine, but I'd got so used to following the progress of a battle through the comm-bead I habitually wore, that I found myself feeling cut off from events without it – a sensation no member of the Commissariat ever feels comfortable with, particularly one as paranoid as me. Well, I'd just have to make do with the hololith to follow what was going on. 'They are,' the Reclaimers captain confirmed, 'and proceeding to their objectives. Resistance is light.'

From where I was standing it looked like the enemy were throwing everything they could at the two combat squads, but I suppose from Gries's point of view, having just seen off a tomb world full of necrons, a rabble of rebellious PDF troopers afforded little more than a handy bit of target practice.

'Thank you, general.' DuPanya discarded his robe with evident relief,

turning out, to my surprise, to be wearing a uniform similar to the officer who'd greeted him beneath it, but without the rank pins at the collar. 'That's better.' He handed the richly patterned material to the nearest guard, and smiled at me in the manner of a man imparting a confidence. 'Can't stand the blasted thing,' he said. 'Makes me look like a sofa.'

I couldn't really argue with that, so I didn't try. Instead, I turned to the hololith and addressed the general. 'You no doubt know who we are,' I said, 'so I won't waste time with introductions.' Especially since I didn't have a clue who three of Gries's companions were in any case; with their helmets on they all looked alike to me, and I doubted that removing them would have left me much the wiser. 'What are we looking at here?'

'The dispositions of all the units we're currently aware of,' the man in blue and grey replied, apparently just as happy to dispense with the formalities as I was. 'Blue for loyalist, yellow, green and red for the different enemy factions. They've been gunning for one another as much as us, so we're happy to let them get on with it while we wait for the relief force to arrive.'

'It has arrived,' Gries reminded him, looming suddenly at my elbow and staring at the display with a thoughtful expression on his face. 'These deployments make no sense.'

I looked at the display more carefully, trying to see what he meant. The red, yellow and green icons were clustered around the blue enclaves like scum round an outfall, each encircling whichever Imperial redoubt fell in the sector of the city they controlled. One each, plus the palace, which seemed to be on the cusp of their zones of influence, and which was bordered on the south and east by red, yellow to the north, and green to the west.

'You're right,' I said after a moment. There were concentrations of colour along their mutual borders, but they weren't contiguous. This wasn't entirely unexpected, since the squabbling factions would need far more manpower to fortify an arbitrary line several kilometres long than any could conceivably bring to bear, but the positions they had dug in at didn't seem particularly strategic, and several potential weak points had been left completely undefended.

Gries reached for the control lectern, muttering the litanies the engineers who maintained similar systems for the Guard seemed to employ while fiddling with the knobs. He must have hit on the right ones, because the three colours suddenly turned a uniform sickly purple, and the whole



pattern fell into place.

‘Throne on Earth,’ I said, horrified. ‘The whole city’s a trap!’

‘Clearly,’ Gries said, as though it should have been obvious from the start – which, I suppose to him, it may well have been.

Only DuPanya looked confused. ‘General Orten?’ he asked, which at least answered the lingering question of the fellow’s name. ‘What does he mean?’

‘He means we’ve been idiots,’ Orten replied, looking about as happy as anyone would be after just being struck by that uncomfortable realisation. ‘The internecine squabbling we’ve been counting on to whittle them down for us was just for show.’ He sighed heavily. ‘I’ll remain in my quarters until you can convene the court martial.’

‘You’ll do no such thing,’ I snapped. ‘If this mess really is your fault, I’m damned if I’m going to let you weasel your way out of cleaning it up by jumping in front of a firing squad.’ Orten and DuPanya gaped at me, and although the Astartes remained as impassive as ever, something about their attitude managed to convey a degree of surprise as well.<sup>14</sup>

‘Commissar Cain is correct,’ Gries agreed. ‘This is no time to deprive ourselves of the most senior PDF officer.’

I nodded, following up on the unexpected show of support. ‘Right now, we need your local knowledge. We can determine whose fault this all is once the rebels have been brought to heel.’

‘I’m at your disposal, of course,’ Orten said, with something of the air of a spirejack who’s just hopped casually over a vent in the hive skin, before glancing back and realising it goes down to the sump.

‘I’m afraid I still don’t follow,’ DuPanya said, a trifle apologetically, and Gries gestured at the hololith with a yellow-gauntleted hand.

‘These troop dispositions make perfect sense if the rebels are acting as a single unified force. They can defend the city from outside attack extremely effectively, and hamper the movements of any Imperial assets attempting to deploy within it.’

‘An Imperial Guard landing would have to take place at the aerodrome,’ I added, pointing out the landing field on the outskirts of Fidelis where, in happier times, aircraft and orbital shuttles would arrive and depart. ‘It’s the only open area large enough to establish a beachhead. But once they’re down, they’d be sitting waterfowl for a coordinated bombardment, from these Basilisk and Manticore units.’

Orten nodded. 'Which have been targeting one another up till now, or so we've been led to believe.'

'They can be neutralised,' Gries said calmly. 'Now we're aware of the scale of the deception, the stratagem will not succeed.'

'Not while the rebels think we're still fooled, anyway,' I said, wondering how they'd managed to pull off so huge a piece of sleight-of-hand. The degree of coordination required would have been immense, taxing the skills of even an experienced high command, let alone a rabble of disaffected militia. My palms were itching again, but this time no sudden flood of insight made sense of my nagging disquiet, so I turned my mind to more immediate concerns. 'The trouble is, the moment we make a move to take out those positions, they'll realise we're on to them.'

'My assessment as well,' Gries agreed. 'Redirecting our combat squads would reveal our intention at once, as the enemy will certainly be aware of their intended destinations by now.' He studied the hololith again. 'The Manticore battery is close to the line of advance we would take to relieve the defenders of the Administratum cloister, however. If my battle-brothers and I make a third sally, the rebels should assume it to be our objective until it's too late.'

'Which only leaves the Basilisks,' I agreed, unable to fault his logic.

'Can the Thunderhawk take them out?' Orten asked, and I shook my head.

'I doubt it,' I told him. 'I've served with an artillery unit, and they're always prepared for an aerial attack. The minute it appears on their auspexes, the Basilisks will scatter. We'd get some, but there's no guarantee enough wouldn't survive to mount an effective bombardment of the aerodrome.'

'Then you'll just have to sneak up on them, won't you?' a new voice cut in, and I turned to find myself facing a young woman in an even more absurd version of the elaborate uniform most of the troopers in the bunker were wearing. The crimson fabric was festooned with silver braid, and the regimental crest was worked into her epaulettes in gold thread, which glittered under the luminators almost as brightly as the buttons on her tunic, the top couple of which had been left undone to expose a generous helping of cleavage. The whole ensemble had clearly come from a couturier rather than a quartermaster, although the laspistol holstered at her waist looked functional, even if nothing else did.

'Commissar, honoured Adeptus Astartes, my daughter Mira,' DuPanya

said, although the resemblance was so strong I'd already deduced that for myself. Mira DuPanya had obviously inherited her father's build, although so far the genetic tendency to chubbiness had got no further than a hint of lush ripeness around the face, and imparting a well-filled look to her tunic and trouser seat, which I would certainly have taken the time to appreciate under more relaxed circumstances. Her hair was blonde and elaborately tressed, green eyes gazing in our direction as though somehow faintly disappointed not to find us more entertaining.

'That might be a little easier said than done,' I replied, addressing her directly, in a tone which, although formally polite, managed to convey the unspoken suffix *so run along and leave the soldiering to the professionals*. Unfortunately, Mira, as I was soon to discover, wouldn't recognise a hint if it was presented to her gift-wrapped, with a label saying '*Hint*' around its neck.

'Only if you're stupid enough to stay on the surface, where they can see you coming,' she said dismissively, and went to stand next to her father, who was beginning to look distinctly uncomfortable. I couldn't say I blamed him either, as he obviously had a much better idea of who we were and what we represented.

To my surprise, though, Orten was nodding thoughtfully. 'You mean go underground?' he asked, and Mira echoed the gesture.

'Of course I do,' she said, scorn and self-confidence mingling in her voice in a manner I was beginning to find quite irksome. 'We spent enough time booby-trapping the service tunnels to stop the rebels getting in, didn't we? Why can't your people get out the same way?'

'It sounds plausible,' I said, having spent enough time running around the undercities of various worlds to be well aware of the sprawling nature of the infrastructure almost certainly underpinning Fidelis. 'Are there any maps we can consult down here?'

'There should be,' Orten said, and went off to converse with a nearby aide.

I turned to Gries. 'I've been down service tunnels before,' I said, 'and they tend to be a bit on the cramped side.' I tried to picture him and his men squeezing through the conduits I used to play in as a child,<sup>15</sup> and failed dismally. 'Perhaps you'd better stick to your original proposal, and leave the Basilisks to a local strike.'

'Indeed,' Gries agreed. 'A two-pronged assault, underground and overground, would seem to be the best strategy. Once our forces are

committed, the combat squads and the Thunderhawk can divert to back us up.'

'Sounds good,' I agreed.

'Then we can begin as soon as you've selected a team to accompany you,' Gries said, and I realised too late what I'd backed myself into. It goes without saying I'd never intended to lead the assault on the Basilisks in person, but knowing what Gries believed about me, which was essentially that my inflated reputation was justified, I could belatedly see why he'd made that assumption. Of course now I couldn't back out without alienating the Adeptus Astartes I was supposed to be liaising with, and undermining my authority in front of the governor, so I'd just have to make the best of it. At least, I thought, things couldn't get any worse.

'I'll take care of that,' Mira said, butting in again with all the casual arrogance of a rich brat born to rule a planet. She nodded coolly at the Astartes captain. 'We'll be ready to move in half an hour.'

In the event it was closer to an hour before the PDF were able to get themselves organised, by which time we'd received the encouraging news that both combat squads had reached their objectives without taking any casualties, and that the prowling Thunderhawk had got the rebels stirred up like a stick in an ants' nest. At which point I found myself in a thoroughly unwelcome conversation with the governor's daughter, who seemed unable to grasp the idea that anyone else's authority could exceed her own.

'I'm sorry, my lady,' I said, exerting all the diplomatic skills I possessed to suppress the impulse to say something far more direct, 'but I cannot in all conscience permit you to accompany us.'

Mira looked at me with the sort of expression I imagine she normally reserved for a ladies' maid who'd run her bath at the wrong temperature. 'I'm leading this expedition,' she said tartly. 'Live with it.'

'It's you continuing to live at all which concerns me,' I said, deciding that subtlety was clearly wasted on her. 'The battlefield is no place for a civilian.' Especially if their presence was liable to put me in any danger, which hers almost certainly would.

The governor's daughter drew herself up to her full height, which was roughly level with my chin, while still somehow contriving to look down her nose at me. 'I happen to be colonel-in-chief of the Household Regiment,' she said, waving a hand in the general direction of her

embonpoint, which was jutting determinedly in my direction. 'Or can't you recognise a military uniform when you see one?'

'As a rule,' I said, biting back the obvious rejoinder about her garish costume. 'But the title of colonel-in-chief is generally considered an honorary one.'

A faint flush began to spread across her cheek, followed by a petulant frown. No doubt the sensation of not getting her own way without question was an unwelcome novelty. 'How much actual military training have you done?' I asked.

'My usual duties don't leave time for that sort of thing,' the girl admitted reluctantly. 'But I've been out on the walls a few times.' She hefted the lasgun she'd picked up from somewhere, with more confidence than I'd normally expect to see in a civilian, and I had to concede she handled it as though she knew what she was doing. 'And I've been using guns on hunting trips since I was a child.'

'In very few of which, I imagine, the game shot back,' I replied sarcastically. I turned to DuPanya, who was hovering nearby with the squad of troopers who'd escorted him to meet the Thunderhawk. Despite their ridiculous getup, they all looked as though they could handle themselves well enough, which was no more than I'd have expected: on most worlds, the household troops guarding the governor tend to be the cream of the PDF, or at least the curds left behind after the Guard tithes have been met. I'd have felt a lot happier undertaking this fool's errand with proper Guardsmen to hide behind, but at least this lot would be the best available. The majority were keeping their expressions studiously neutral, but a few were making no secret of how much they were enjoying the spectacle of their colonel-in-chief meeting unexpected resistance. 'Can't you talk some sense into her?'

'Not often,' DuPanya admitted, sounding almost proud of the fact. 'And her rank might be honorary, as you say, but she does take it seriously. After all, it makes her the most senior officer in the regiment.'

'Fine,' I said, greatly cheered by the realisation that in that case I could legitimately shoot her if she got too annoying. 'But we're running out of time to debate this.' Gries and his Astartes had already left the command bunker, and would be halfway to the gate by now. If we were going to be in position before the enemy realised their artillery batteries were the Reclaimers' real objective, and be ready to launch our own assault at the

same time, we'd have to get moving; otherwise we'd arrive to find our target on high alert, instead of having the advantage of surprise.

'Then stop wasting it,' Mira said. She turned and gestured to the troopers, most of whom were carrying satchel charges in addition to their usual weapons. 'Move out.'

'Stay where you are,' I snapped, freezing the squad's first shuffle of movement to instant immobility. I turned back to Mira, with my most intimidating commissarial expression on my face. 'You're staying behind. Live with it.' As I'd anticipated, having her own words thrown back at her didn't go down at all well.

'Correct me if I'm wrong, commissar,' she replied, pronouncing my title in tones which would have frozen helium, 'but I was under the impression that your position is purely an advisory one, outside the normal chain of command.'

'Technically, that's the case,' I admitted, masking my sudden unease. 'But our advice is generally heeded by the officers receiving it.' Because if it isn't we're entitled to shoot them, which inclines them to listen.

'Then consider me advised,' Mira said, turning to beckon to the soldiers once more. 'Move out.'

Well, I could hardly gun her down in front of her father and hope to continue a productive working relationship, and there seemed to be every possibility that the enemy would do the job for me in any case; so I simply shrugged with what I hoped looked like casual indifference. 'Duly noted, colonel,' I said dryly.



## FOUR

At first, to my carefully concealed surprise, things seemed to be going well after all. Too naive or arrogant to appreciate the dangers of taking point, Mira led from the front, which clearly sat well with the troopers accompanying us, striding confidently through the echoing underground labyrinth as though we were simply out for a stroll rather than heading deeper into enemy territory with every step. That was fine with me. Apart from the callipygian spectacle she presented from that angle, she was certain to draw the fire from any enemies who might be lurking down here, or trigger any booby traps they might have set, in good time to warn the rest of us.

Entering the warren of tunnels had turned out to be surprisingly easy, simply a matter of dropping through an access hatch set in the floor of a corridor near the palace kitchens, and as I'd straightened up after flexing my knees to absorb the impact of landing, I'd immediately felt more comfortable than at any time since my arrival on Viridia. Accompanied by an absurdly dressed fire magnet or not, this was an environment I felt at home in, all my old underhiver's instincts flooding back. I glanced round, noting with approval the burned-off stubs of metal in the wall which had once supported a ladder leading to the hatchway overhead.

Orten had assured me that all possible precautions had been taken to safeguard the palace and its environs from enemy infiltration, short of collapsing the tunnels completely with demo charges (which would have prevented DuPanya from fleeing if the palace fell to the besieging rebels,

and was therefore unthinkable), and I was pleased to see that he appeared to be right about that. Apart from a regrettable tendency to believe intelligence assessments without asking too many questions, he seemed to be competent enough, and I felt a certain amount of satisfaction that my judgement about leaving him alive and in charge appeared to be sound.

Abruptly we were plunged into darkness, as the trapdoor above us was dropped back into place, and I felt my other senses reaching out as they always did in the absence of light. A faint current of air against my face provided a sense of direction, and the overlapping echoes of bootsoles against 'crete pinpointed the walls nicely. 'Close your eyes for a moment,' I advised. 'It'll help them to adjust.'

'Or we could just kindle the luminators,' Mira said, suiting the action to the word. A sudden flare of light made me squint, and a couple of the troopers followed her lead, filling the narrow corridor with dancing beams, which struck highlights from the pipes and cable runs fixed to the walls and depending from the ceiling. At least she'd had the sense to attach the thing to the bayonet lugs of her lasgun, leaving both hands free to handle the weapon, and the others weren't slow to do the same.

'Good idea, colonel,' I said, with heavy sarcasm. 'And how about a rousing chorus of "Soldiers of the Throne" while we're about it, so the enemy can hear us coming as well?'

'You're the one who said we're running out of time,' she rejoined, turning to lead the way at a brisk jog, which did interesting things to her over-filled uniform. 'We won't get anywhere stumbling along in the dark.'

Reluctant to admit that she had a point, I contented myself with hanging back enough to take advantage of the shadows, in the comforting certainty that my black greatcoat would be almost perfect camouflage in the dark, particularly against an enemy still dazzled after gunning down Mira.

After a few hundred metres, which by my estimate put us more or less beneath the outer wall, I was able to see the reason for her confidence. The corridor up ahead was blocked by a fresh rockcrete wall, into which a narrow iron door had been set, just wide enough for one man to pass through at a time. Mira stopped just ahead of it and slapped her palm down on the scanner plate of a genocode reader, which had evidently been wired into the locking plate by a tech-priest with rather more pressing concerns than doing a neat job. The device buzzed and hummed to itself for a moment, giving me time to catch up with her, then the latch clicked, and the



door swung outwards. Unbelievably, I was the only one covering it.<sup>16</sup>

‘How do you know the enemy aren’t just waiting on the other side?’ I asked, nettled by her smirk as she paused on the threshold to look back at me.

‘Because none of the mines have gone off,’ she answered. ‘Better hurry, they’ll be set again in thirty seconds.’ Then she was gone, trotting off into the darkness beyond, her troopers pelting through the doorway in her wake.

I followed, the door booming back into place at my back, content to see by the relatively dim light from her luminator, and picked up my pace when I saw she hadn’t been exaggerating about the mines. There was a big cluster of frag charges, fixed to the walls and ceiling, their curved casings designed to spread their deadly payload as widely as possible. In the open they’d be lethal enough, but in a space as confined as this, they’d quite simply shred anyone incautious enough to approach them into bloody mist.

I picked up my pace until I was sure I’d passed beyond the range of the lethal devices, hearing them rearm with a faint *click!* a second or two after I was through the choke point, and suppressed a shudder. ‘Any more little surprises like that one?’ I asked, keeping my voice steady nonetheless.

‘None we’ll have to worry about,’ Mira assured me. In my experience, statements like that are just tempting fate, and, sure enough, before the day was out, we were to be presented with a surprise greater and more deadly than either of us could possibly have imagined. But since I was still in blissful ignorance, I turned and followed her, instead of running in the opposite direction as hard as I could.

Another hour or so of brisk walking got us to our destination. According to the map Orten had provided, and which I’d immediately loaded into my slate, it wasn’t the most direct route; but it did avoid having to pass through any choke points where we’d have had to crawl, climb or negotiate obstacles, which Mira had neither the build nor the temperament to deal with. Since I didn’t think we’d lost any appreciable time by the detour, which had taken us through the usual collection of utility ducts, watercourses and sewers (the last of which had clearly raised Mira’s fastidious patrician hackles, to my carefully concealed amusement), I didn’t bother to call her on it.

Despite my fears, her luminator didn’t seem to have attracted any unwelcome attention, which, contrary to what you might expect, did

nothing to relieve the tension I was feeling. The longer we remained undiscovered, the more I became certain that we were surely about to be, and I found myself listening out for any trace of sound which might betray ambushers lurking ahead of us in the darkness. I heard plenty, of course, but instinct and experience enabled me to identify most of the noises almost at once, and discount them as any kind of threat.

Most common was the scuttling of vermin, running for cover at the approach of light and noise, but occasionally the scuffling was louder, indicating a human presence. Invariably these would be fleeing too, however, rather than advancing to contact, which meant they were civilians, with an understandably cautious attitude to men with guns. Whether they were artisans, trying to keep the fractured infrastructure of the city from falling apart completely, or merely the luckless dispossessed endemic to large-scale civil disorder, desperate or fearful enough to attempt to find some kind of refuge down here, I had no idea. They weren't shooting at us, and that was all that mattered to me.

'We're here,' Mira said at last, and I checked my chronograph, wondering what sort of progress Gries and his squad were making. From what I'd seen of them, I'd have laid pretty fair odds that they'd reached their objective by now, and were making short work of it. Once again, I found myself reaching for the comm-bead which would normally have been sitting in my ear, and rueing its absence. It had, of course, occurred to me to scrounge one from the command bunker, but such refinements appeared to be lacking among the Viridian PDF. The best they could offer me was a bulky portable vocaster, which was currently bouncing along on the back of its operator. Stopping to use the thing would have taken up time we could ill afford, however, so I'd had to resign myself to remaining out of touch for a while longer, and trying to ignore my misgivings as best I could.

'Good,' I responded, surreptitiously checking my slate to see where 'here' actually was. It turned out to be a sewer, running directly under the piazza the rebels had decided to use as an artillery park, and I began to get the first inkling of a battle plan. A little late for that, you may be thinking, and you'd probably be right; but I'd been bounced into this fool's errand by circumstance, not choice, and I hadn't had much of a chance to think about anything, beyond the most immediate concern of ensuring my own survival. I beckoned the vox man forwards and he came to join me, unclipping the bulky handset as he did so.

‘Cain to Adeptus Astartes,’ I said, praying to the Emperor that the frequency I’d been given was correct, and keeping it short in case we were being monitored. ‘In position. Query yours.’

‘Engaging,’ Gries responded, to my relief. ‘Resistance light. The Thunderhawk will commence diversionary attacks in two minutes.’

‘Thanks,’ I replied, taking in the single squad of troopers accompanying me, and the distinctly unmartial figure of Mira, who was listening intently, but who, for once, seemed able to resist the temptation to shove her oar in, thank the Emperor. ‘We’re going to need all the help we can get.’

‘Leave this channel open,’ Gries said, then cut the link at his end.

‘What did he mean by that?’ Mira demanded, as if I knew the answer and was merely withholding it out of pique.

I shrugged. ‘Probably wants an accurate position fix for the Thunderhawk, so we don’t end up on the wrong end of some friendly fire,’ I hazarded. Considering the amount of concentrated lethality that the gunship represented, it seemed a reasonable precaution to me. I turned to the sergeant in charge of the squad, whose name I didn’t know. Mira hadn’t bothered with introductions, if she’d even considered the men under her nominal command as individuals in the first place. ‘We’ll need to get up top and find out exactly where the artillery pieces are. With a bit of luck we can use the demo charges to collapse this tunnel underneath them, and cripple the battery without having to fight our way through the sentries.’

‘If they’re parked close enough to it,’ the sergeant agreed, homing in on the weak spot of the plan without undermining my authority by actually stating it, like efficient noncoms<sup>17</sup> have been doing since humanity first swung down from the trees on Holy Terra and started hitting one another with rocks.

‘Let’s hope they are,’ I said, ‘or we’ll just have to do this the hard way.’

From my time with the 12th Valhallan<sup>18</sup> I knew that each artillery piece would probably be fully crewed, plus a few sentries, logistical support personnel and a handful of junior officers and noncoms to make sure the conscripts shoved the shells in the breach the right way round. Given that we already knew, from the orbital pics, that there were five Basilisks in the battery, that meant anything from thirty to fifty men. Although I’d be happy enough taking on odds of three or five to one against mere PDF mutineers with proper Guardsmen behind me, the troops I had now were probably little better in quality than the ones we were facing. And that was without

taking Mira into account, who was probably worth an extra squad to the enemy just on her own.

‘Well there’s only one way to find out,’ she said, starting up the ladder leading to the manhole cover above our heads before I could stop her. Having already seen enough to know that remonstrating with her would be pointless, and shooting her would be out of the question close enough to the enemy for an alert sentry to hear, I’d just have to go along with it for now.

‘Wait here,’ I instructed the sergeant, who seemed more than happy to comply. ‘Check the charges while I’m gone.’ There was no point in having the whole squad blundering about up there, when I was sure Mira could attract the attention of the enemy perfectly well on her own. I could hardly leave her to her own devices, however, so I clambered up after her, having waited a moment to make sure that her emergence into daylight wouldn’t be followed at once by a barrage of lasgun fire.

It wasn’t, so I stuck my head cautiously out of the hole, finding myself in a street which looked much the worse for wear: the buildings on either side of it were pockmarked and perforated by the prolonged and indiscriminate use of heavy ordnance, while the carriageway a few metres ahead had been comprehensively blocked to traffic by the rusting hulk of a burned-out Chimera. Taking advantage of the cover it afforded, I popped up out of the hole like a sump rat scenting a fresh corpse, and scuttled into the lee of the derelict vehicle.

‘Where are the others?’ Mira asked, from roughly the level of my knees, having gone prone under the raised dozer blade for extra protection, the first sensible thing I’d ever seen her do. Her lasgun was unslung, aimed back at the manhole, evidently intended to cover my advance, and I breathed a silent prayer of thanks to the Golden Throne that she hadn’t been spooked enough to pull the trigger.

‘Down the hole,’ I said quietly. ‘I told them to stay put.’

‘You did what?’ She stood up and glared at me, the effect somewhat spoiled by the thick coating of grime now adhering to her jacket and the knees of her trousers; at least she’d blend into the background a little better now, which was something. ‘We need them with us!’

‘Did you ever go stalking on these hunting trips of yours?’ I asked.

Mira nodded, sullenly. ‘Of course,’ she said, having the common sense to keep her voice down too, which was a welcome surprise.

‘And did you have a demi-score of troopers crashing around the place

while you did?’ I asked reasonably.

Mira shook her head dismissively. ‘Of course not, it would have frightened the game away...’ Then the coin dropped. ‘I see, of course. We’re going to need to move quietly.’

I shook my head. ‘I’m going to need to move quietly,’ I said. ‘You stay here, in case I need covering fire.’

I’d be the first to admit that taking the risk of scouting the enemy positions myself, instead of letting Mira get on with it, seems a little uncharacteristic, but I had sound enough reasons at the time. Firstly, I’d had more than enough practice at sneaking around in the immediate vicinity of the enemy without being spotted, whereas Mira’s alleged stalking skills were an unknown quantity. Secondly, thanks to my time with the 12th Valhallan, I knew enough about artillery to assess just how big a threat the battery really was once I got a decent look at it, whereas the most useful thing Mira was likely to report was that the Basilisks were a horribly unfashionable colour. Thirdly, thanks to my innate affinity for underground environments, I’d know instantly, just by looking, how close they were to the sewer line, and where best to place the charges to cause the maximum amount of subsidence.

For a moment it looked as though Mira was about to argue the point, but before she got the chance the circling Thunderhawk pilot decided to provide the diversion Gries had promised me. Whatever she’d been going to say was abruptly swallowed by the muffled *crump!* of a distant detonation, and a plume of smoke nudged its way above the artificial horizon of the buildings surrounding us, followed a moment later by a faint tremor through the soles of my boots. It seemed he’d found an ammunition dump, or something equally combustible; at any rate, it was a pretty safe bet that the attention of the rebels had been effectively grabbed.

Taking advantage of the moment, I made a run for the nearest building, which seemed structurally sound, despite the number of holes blasted through its outer walls. It had evidently been an emporium of some kind, but what it used to sell I could only guess, as the looters had been there long before me and gutted the place. Entering through the long, wide gap where the window used to be, my feet crunching and slithering for a moment on the shattered glass, I made for the shadows at the rear of the shop, where, as in the tunnel, my sombre uniform would allow me to blend in more easily.

Luck, or the Emperor, was with me, and I found a staircase just the other

side of a wooden door which had been kicked or rammed off its hinges. There was an elevator too, but I wouldn't have taken it even if the power was still on; the idea of being discovered by the enemy trapped in a small metal box was disturbing, to say the least. I took the stairs easily, five or six flights, before a chill draught arrested my progress, and I ventured out into what had evidently been one of the upper sales floors. Indeed, it seemed that irrespective of the number of storeys the emporium used to boast, this was now as high as it was possible to go. The ceiling was down across half the floor area, along with sufficient rubble to make me certain that whatever might remain of the original structure higher up, it was extremely unlikely to be able to bear my weight.

This storey was high enough for my purposes, though, as a quick glance was enough to assure me. The far wall was missing, the floor coming to an abrupt end about a metre from where it should be, affording a panoramic view across much of the city. I made for it cautiously, testing every footfall, but it all seemed solid enough, and within a minute or two I was close enough to the edge to look down into the rebels' artillery park, across the rubble remains of the intervening building on the other side of the street. This had evidently fared far worse than the one I was occupying; though a few floors still remained, it had been reduced to about half the height of the shattered structure I was currently standing in.

The most cursory of glances was enough to tell me that my plan to collapse the sewer wouldn't cut it. Only one of the artillery pieces was in the right place to be disabled, the rest being dispersed around the square, backed into the remains of buildings for concealment and protection, and surrounded by sandbagged emplacements. No chance of being able to just run up and place a satchel charge either: we'd be cut down before we even got close. As the wind shifted, it brought with it the grumble of idling engines and the acrid tang of burned promethium; I'd been right about them being prepared to scatter if the Thunderhawk moved in their direction too. Perhaps if we mined the roads with the demo charges we'd brought with us we could bottle them up long enough for the gunship to take them out, but our chances of being able to place the explosives in the open without being spotted were minimal.

I was still musing over the problem when a las-bolt hissed past me, impacting against the stump of one of the columns which used to support the floor above. I turned, drawing my weapons and cursing myself for a

fool. The very reason I'd chosen this spot to scout the enemy emplacement from also made it the perfect place to station sentries, and I should have anticipated an enemy presence here. Two men were running at me, lasguns in their hands, and firing as they came, but fortunately it's almost impossible to shoot accurately while on the move; if they'd had the sense to stand still and aim properly, they'd probably have dropped me before I'd even become aware of their presence.

Unfortunately for them, I wasn't so stupid, only taking a couple of strides to find refuge behind the sturdy pillar which had already stopped one of their las-bolts, before dropping to a crouch and cracking off a couple of rounds of my own. My aim was scarcely any better at first, one of the las-bolts from my pistol clipping the edge of the right-hand man's torso armour, but it was enough to make him hesitate. As he looked around for some cover I saved him the bother, putting a third and less hurried shot through the middle of his face. He went down hard, and beyond the usual reflexive spasms, didn't move again.

Which left the second man, who was going wide towards the drop, hoping to flank me and get a shot in round the rockcrete pillar I was sheltering behind. I dodged back, trying to target him around the other side, but with a belated surge of common sense he switched to full auto, hosing my makeshift position down with a blizzard of fire too heavy for me to be able to risk popping out to take a crack at him.

Abruptly the firing ceased, and I seized the opportunity the momentary lull presented, lunging out to the side as I stood, my chainsword swinging to meet the anticipated charge, while my laspistol sought a target. To my surprise, however, he was already down, flat out on the rubble-strewn floor, deader than Horus. I approached the corpse warily, anticipating some kind of trick, but as I got closer I could see that the back of his head was missing, taken out by another las-bolt. From the angle of the wound, it had clearly come from somewhere down below, outside the building.

I edged cautiously to the brink of the drop and glanced down. Mira was still crouched in the lee of the burned-out Chimera, her lasgun raised and pointing in my direction. Seeing me, she lowered the weapon and waved, in a manner which, even at that distance, struck me as distinctly pleased with herself. Hard to resent that under the circumstances, though, so I returned the wave and turned back to the bodies of the late sentries. Neither had any vox gear on him, or anything else which might have provided some useful

intelligence come to that, so I started to head back towards the stairs, intent on nothing more than getting back down the hole and out of sight before anyone got around to missing them.

I'd barely gone a pace or two, though, before the air seemed to thicken around me, the hairs on my arms bristling as if a thunderstorm was building, and a remarkably unpleasant sensation of pressure began to grow behind my eyes. It felt as if my sinuses were being packed with rockcrete, and I stumbled, my vision blurring. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the feeling ended, leaving me almost giddy with relief.

I hurried back to the hole in the wall, looking outside, anxiously, just as a rumble of displaced air echoed between the buildings, like one of the distant explosions where the crew of the Thunderhawk were continuing to amuse themselves. The rebel artillery park was in a state of complete confusion, with people running everywhere, like rats in a room when someone turns on the lights, and as the firing started, I began to see why. Towering figures in white and yellow armour were plodding unhurriedly through the pandemonium, shrugging off the las-bolts and occasional grenade sleeting in their direction with magnificent disdain. They were larger and bulkier than the Space Marines I'd seen before; although I was to become familiar with it later, this was the first time I'd ever seen Terminator armour in action, apart from a handful of seconds aboard the necron vessel before losing consciousness. Most of the Space Marines wearing it seemed to be carrying twin-barrelled bolters, which put out a staggering amount of firepower, ripping all traces of resistance to shreds with contemptuous ease, and one had a pair of missile pods mounted above his shoulders.

As I watched, the Terminator fired one from each, taking out a Basilisk which had started to move away in an explosion which knocked many of the defenders from their feet, but left the Astartes striding grimly forwards, apparently unmoved. Another of his fellows approached the nearest artillery piece and began literally tearing it apart, the long metal claws attached to his gauntlets shearing through the thick metal as though it were no more substantial than mist and shadows, a faint nimbus of arcane energies crackling about them.<sup>19</sup> Panic-stricken crewmen bailed from it and ran in random directions, desperate to get away before those formidable talons found purchase in flesh.

Tearing my eyes reluctantly away from the spectacle, because it's not often I get so close to a battle without someone diverting my attention by trying



to kill me, I glanced down to make sure Mira was all right. As it happened she was looking distinctly apprehensive, and who could blame her; apart from the disconcerting effect of being caught in the fringes of a teleport field, she'd be hearing all the noise without a clue as to what was going on. Catching her eye, I waved, as nonchalantly as I could manage, and started back down the stairs to reassure her. After all, annoying brat or not, she had just saved my life, which was always welcome, and she was considerably more decorative than Jurgen, whose job that usually was.

'What's going on?' she demanded, the minute I came within earshot.

'The Space Marines are taking out the artillery for us,' I told her, trying not to sound too pleased about it. 'That headache a few minutes ago was a bunch of Terminators teleporting in.' Which seemed a bit like overkill, given that a combat squad of ordinary Adeptus Astartes could have taken out the rebels without breaking sweat, but only the Terminators had the training and experience to deploy by teleporter. A thought struck me, and I nodded in sudden understanding. 'No wonder Gries wanted the vox link kept open. They must have used it as a homing beacon.'

'Then we need to get the men up here,' she said, turning towards the manhole we'd first emerged from. 'The Space Marines might need some backup.'

'I doubt it,' I said, keeping the relief from my voice with an effort. It could just have been the bulk of the intervening building, but it sounded to me like the firing was already reducing in both intensity and volume. 'But you're right about getting back under cover as fast as we can.' If I'd read the situation right, the few remaining rebels would give up trying to make a fight of it and start fleeing for their lives at any moment now, and that would be a bad time to get caught in the open. I fully expected Mira to argue about that, as she seemed to do more or less by reflex every time I tried to get her to be sensible, but if she was about to she never got the chance. Instead, she crouched behind the wrecked Chimera and raised her lasgun.

'Too late,' she said.



## FIVE

A quick glance round the Chimera's hull was all it took to confirm that Mira was right: there was no way we could get back to the tunnels now without being spotted. A full squad of rebel infantry, still wearing the remains of their old PDF uniforms, embellished by some paintstick scrawl in place of the unit patches which had been ripped away from the sleeves, was deploying further up the road in skirmish order. As I watched them come, the palms of my hands started to itch. Though I couldn't quite put my finger on it yet, something wasn't right.

'There are more up there,' Mira said, swinging her lasgun in the direction of the upper floor I'd been observing the enemy from, and where I'd left the two dead sentries a few moments before. She was rewarded by a flicker of movement, as whoever it was ducked back out of sight with almost indecent haste.

'Frak!' I said, heedless of the fact that there was a lady present. We'd be dead meat if anyone started shooting at us from up there, and even though Mira had picked off one man from this distance, I didn't imagine for a moment that she'd be able to repeat the trick with las-bolts bursting around her. 'There must have been a third man up there all the time.'

I didn't see how there could have been, though, or he would have surely intervened in the firefight. But the only other explanation I could think of didn't make sense either. Neither of the sentries we'd taken out had any vox gear, so how could they have called for help?

'I'm more worried about the ones down here,' Mira said, cracking off a

couple of shots before I could stop her, which took one of the troopers advancing on us down and sent the rest scurrying for cover. She grinned exultantly at me, before returning her eye to the sights. 'I got one!'

'Instead of holding your fire long enough to be sure of several, when they got a bit closer,' I said, trying not to sound too hacked off about it. I readied my own weapons, hunkering down just as a las-bolt hit the discoloured metal above us, sending a brief rain of rust particles pattering off my hat. As I'd feared, the man on the building was targeting us too, although, thank the Emperor, he seemed to be an indifferent marksman.

'I think I'm doing pretty well, actually,' Mira snapped, turning to send a couple of retaliatory las-bolts back in the direction of the upper floor. She didn't seem to hit anything this time, but successfully discouraged whoever it was from trying again for a moment or two. 'At least I'm shooting at them, instead of just criticising all the time.'

Nothing in all my years as a commissar had prepared me for a response like that, but then I'd never encountered anyone quite like Mira before either; at least, not in a parody of a military uniform, and apparently trying to live up to it. My dealings with the daughters of the aristocracy had, up until that point, been confined to the kind of soirees my fraudulent reputation had attracted invitations to, generally as part of a delegation from an Imperial Guard contingent who'd either just arrived in-system to deal with some pressing threat, or were about to depart after having done so. I knew they were reasonably good dancers, moderately dull conversationalists and tolerably pleasant company for the night, but that was about all. There was little point in frittering our last few moments away on a pointless argument, though, so I bit back my instinctive response and peered round the Chimera's dozer blade again.

'Something's definitely wrong, here,' I said. These were no panic-stricken routers, fleeing the Astartes: they were advancing swiftly and purposefully from one piece of cover to the next, half of them moving while the rest kept their comrades covered. I pulled my head back behind the thick steel plate just ahead of a blizzard of las-bolts.

'You think?' Mira levelled her lasgun to retaliate, heedless of the state of her powerpack, and I cracked off a few shots of my own in the general direction of the upper floor, certain I'd seen movement up there again. The situation was getting more desperate by the second: it could only be a matter of time before the lurkers above us managed to line up a shot, or the

advancing troopers moved round our flanks.

Looking back, we'd probably have been dead, or a great deal worse, in another handful of minutes, had it not been for the surviving rebels in the artillery park. By the grace of the Emperor, they chose that moment to break and run, pelting down the avenue in an inchoate, howling mob, any pretence of military discipline completely forgotten in the desperate rush to save themselves.

'Come on!' I said, grabbing Mira by the arm and making a dash for the open manhole before she had a chance to start arguing again. 'Now's our chance!'

To her credit, she seemed to get the idea, putting on a fair turn of speed for a woman whose usual idea of exercise was probably walking down the corridor to the dining room. Timing was crucial: it would have been ironic to say the least to have been shielded from the las-bolts of our enemies by the bodies of their comrades, only to be trampled to death by the hysterical mob.

As it was, we managed to make it to the hole in the road with no more difficulty than one might expect, despite the risk of twisting an ankle on the rubble-strewn carriageway, cracking off a couple of shots at our most visible enemies as we ran; not with any hope of hitting them, of course, but in the vague hope of preventing them from gunning us down as we emerged. Seeing no point in delaying any more than I had to, I raised my laspistol and chainsword above my head, to keep them from fouling on the manhole's rim, and jumped feet first into the darkness beneath. I was no stranger to this sort of thing, having grown up in the underhive, and was already flexing my knees to absorb the impact as I hit the rockcrete about three metres below. I don't mind admitting it jarred a lot more than I remembered it doing as a juvie, but I remained on my feet, and took a couple of cautious steps to check that my ankles were still where they belonged, instead of having been driven up through my shins like they felt.

'Are you mad?' Mira asked, scrambling down the ladder, the luminator still attached to her lasgun strobing round the narrow chamber, and I shrugged.

'How would I know?' I asked, not really caring to hear her answer. I'd already met enough head cases in the course of my career to have filled an asylum, and every single one of them had thought they were perfectly sane. To my relief, however, Mira disdained to reply, having found something

else to get sniffy about.

‘Sergeant!’ she yelled, raising echoes which chased their way down the tunnels. ‘Where are you?’

‘Quiet!’ I said, the absence of the squad we’d left here beginning to register for the first time. ‘Something’s very wrong.’

‘I can see that,’ she said pettishly, the beam of her luminator sweeping round the tunnel at random, which was no help at all. At least there were no visible signs of recent combat, which I supposed was something. ‘They should have been waiting for us.’ The full seriousness of the situation still seemed not to have registered with her; it was a minor annoyance, on a par with being kept waiting by a tardy chauffeur, that was all.

‘We need to get moving,’ I said. Whatever had happened to our companions was a mystery which could wait until later. ‘That squad will be down here after us at any moment.’ As if to punctuate my words, something rattled down the rungs of the ladder, and I started to run down the passageway without further thought. ‘Grenade!’ I called back over my shoulder.

Fortunately, Mira was fast enough on the uptake when it mattered, and was hard on my heels when the frag charge exploded, peppering the stonework around where we’d been standing a moment before. ‘You just left me there!’ she squeaked indignantly, once the echoes had died away enough to hear her.

‘I warned you,’ I snapped back. ‘What more do you want? “Ladies first” doesn’t count on the battlefield.’ And a good thing too, if you ask me, otherwise we’d both have been shredded.

Mira stared at me, her mouth working, but stunned into silence for the first time since I’d met her. While my momentary advantage still lasted, I grabbed the barrel of the lasgun,<sup>20</sup> and doused the luminator. ‘And keep that frakking thing turned off,’ I added, ‘if you want to get out of here alive.’

I braced myself for the argument I was certain would follow, but our adventures so far seemed to have convinced Mira that playing soldiers was a lot more dangerous than she’d bargained for, and she contented herself with muttering something that sounded like ‘peasant’. All in all, I’ve been called a lot worse in my time, and could certainly live with that.

‘Come on,’ I said, taking her arm and leading her down a side passage which I could sense nearby from the altered pattern of echoes around it. I suppose it was possible that our pursuers might have given up after

chucking their frag grenade down the manhole, but if I was as determined to see someone dead as they seemed to be, I certainly wouldn't be taking anything for granted at that point.

'Where to?' Mira asked, keeping her voice down at least.

'Wherever this leads,' I replied, resisting the temptation to shrug, which she couldn't have seen anyway. There was a faint current of air, which meant that it must come out in the open eventually, or at least connect to somewhere that did. Then I caught the unmistakable sound of running feet in the passageway we'd just left behind us, and tightened my grip on her bicep. 'Freeze.'

At least she had the gumption to comply with that, and we remained immobile as the slapping bootsoles got louder, accompanied by a rising glow, which seeped into our refuge – though not, fortunately, far enough to reach our position. If any of the troopers chasing us had bothered to direct a beam along the side passage they would have nailed us for sure, but luckily they seemed convinced we'd stuck to the main tunnel, and could be caught up with if they just ran fast enough. As the glow and the hurrying footsteps faded away, Mira let out a sigh of relief and sagged against me.

'Who were those people?' she asked.

'I've no idea,' I told her, happy to let her remain there for a minute or two, while I got my bearings and my breath back. Sure we'd eluded our pursuers for the moment, I pulled the slate out of my pocket and checked Orten's map, being sure to keep my back between the passageway behind us and the faint glow of the pict screen. Mira's face shimmered out of the darkness, as she leaned forwards to look at it.

A few seconds' scrutiny was enough to identify the side passage we'd taken refuge in, and my spirits began to lift, at least a little. We hadn't come far, and if we could follow the draught I still felt against my face to the surface, we would come out close enough to the Astartes to link up with them.

'We have to go back,' Mira said, a worried frown just visible on her face as she studied the pictscreen. 'This passage is heading completely the wrong way.'

'It's the right way, if it's taking us away from those troopers,' I told her shortly. 'They'll realise we've given them the slip at any moment, then they'll double back.' This clearly hadn't occurred to her.

'But what about our own people?' she asked. 'Shouldn't we try to find

them?’

I shook my head, forgetting the gesture couldn’t be seen in the darkness. ‘There’s no point,’ I told her bluntly. ‘Something must have happened to them, or they’d still be waiting when we got back. Best case, they spotted some rebels trying to escape along the tunnels and are still trying to chase them down.’

‘And worst case, the mutineers found them first,’ Mira concluded.

‘Right,’ I said, not wanting to think too much about that. There was too big a contradiction here, between the disciplined, coordinated troopers who were pursuing us, and the disorganised rabble who’d fortuitously got in their way just when they had us cold.

‘Then let’s get on with it,’ she agreed. ‘Can we use the luminator again?’

After a moment, I agreed, reluctantly. We’d make precious little progress without it, the governor’s daughter lacking my feel for the labyrinth we’d found ourselves in, and I didn’t want to still be here when the squad we’d eluded came back to check the side tunnels. ‘For the moment,’ I said. ‘But keep listening out. The moment we hear movement behind us, I want you to douse it. Clear?’

‘Pellucid,’ she said, and clicked it on again. The beam revealed the same age-worn brickwork that I’d seen in the main sewer, its surface moist and slick with lichen, although the branch passage we’d entered seemed to be a storm drain rather than a cloaca, to Mira’s evident relief. The trickle of water under our boots was clear, and noticeably less odiferous than the stream we’d so recently left. ‘What’s that?’

‘Nothing good,’ I said, stopping to examine the patch of lichen she’d spotlighted. It had been scraped by something, which had left parallel grooves of visible brickwork. I spread my fingers, barely able to span them. ‘Are there any stories of mutants living down in the tunnels here?’

‘Of course.’ Mira began to laugh, before realising I wasn’t joking. ‘There are always stories about the undercity. I doubt there’s anywhere in the Imperium which doesn’t have its folk tales.’

Well, she was right about that, which didn’t mean there wasn’t a germ of truth in at least some of them. There was no point worrying about it though: the soldiers behind us were real enough, and anything else we might run into was only a potential threat. I gestured ahead of us, into the darkness. ‘After you,’ I said.

‘I thought you said “ladies first” didn’t count on the battlefield,’ Mira said,

moving off, with a grin in my direction.

‘It does when you’re carrying the light,’ I told her, making sure I hung back enough to take advantage of my black coat in the darkness. A faint alteration in the pattern of echoes tickled the edge of my awareness, and I urged her on, picking up my own pace as I did so. ‘Better get moving. They’re coming back.’

Mira needed no further encouragement and broke into a trot, her lasgun held ready for use. I followed, my own weapons readied, hoping I wouldn’t need them, but rather suspecting I would before too much longer.

The faint current of air was growing a little stronger now, and I began to hope we’d make it back to the surface before the pursuing troopers picked up our trail again, but in this I was to be disappointed. ‘Kill the light,’ I murmured, just before the footsteps reached the junction behind us, and, to my relief, Mira did so at once, without arguing.

‘I can see daylight,’ she breathed, the relief in her voice palpable, and I must confess to feeling the same. A faint grey glow was seeping into the tunnel from somewhere up ahead, and we hurried towards it, certain that our pursuers must be gaining by now. The scuffling of bootsoles behind us suddenly became more resonant, telling me plainly that they’d entered the narrower passage behind us, and my shoulderblades began tingling, anticipating a las-bolt at any moment.

The glimmer up ahead began to grow brighter, but the yellower glow of luminators began to pervade the tunnel too, and I turned, loosing off a flurry of las-bolts from my pistol. I scarcely expected to hit anyone, but I was hoping it might take the edge off their enthusiasm at the very least.

‘Are you sure you should be giving them ideas?’ Mira asked waspishly, but I was too busy trying to listen to the commotion behind us to pay any attention to her. The bobbing light dimmed, and the rhythm of boot against brick was abruptly disrupted. The echoes made it hard to be sure, but it sounded to me as if the leading trooper had stumbled, or even been brought down if I was really lucky, and the others were either tripping over him or breaking stride to negotiate the sudden obstacle.

‘I’ve just bought us a few more seconds,’ I snapped. ‘Don’t waste them!’ The light up ahead was bright enough to pick out our surroundings by now – more lichenous brick – and I could see the droplets of water thrown up by our feet as they slapped down in the thin film of moisture coating the tunnel floor. The air current was stronger too, and smelling fresher; we were



almost out into the open air.

Abruptly, we broke free of the tunnel into a wide chamber, from which a number of passageways similar to the one we'd entered by led. Mira stopped, almost in the centre, illuminated by a wan shaft of sunlight, which struck highlights from the garish ornamentation on her tunic and her by now rather bedraggled coiffure. 'Frakking warp!' she said feelingly.

I was so surprised by the sudden barrack-room oath in the mouth of a lady of breeding that it took me a moment to register the reason for her outburst. When I did, I'm bound to confess, I felt like heartily endorsing it. Daylight and fresh air alike were coming from a metal grille in the ceiling, at least a metre above our heads, with no obvious method of getting to it, or through it even if we could.

'Up on my shoulders!' I said, stowing my weapons to free my hands and stooping to offer Mira a boost.

She looked at me as if I was deranged.

'I'm a chatelaine, not a carnival performer!' she snapped.

'You'll be a dead one if we can't get that grille open,' I retorted. 'Would you rather lift me up to it instead?'

Any verbal response to that being entirely unnecessary, she simply slung her lasgun across her back and clambered up to perch awkwardly on my shoulders, her legs dangling either side of my neck like an overstuffed scarf. I reached up to steady her, and she slapped my fingers away, almost overbalancing in the process.

'Keep your hands to yourself!' she squealed, in tones of outrage.

'I'm sure you're convinced you're the Emperor's gift to men,' I snarled, 'but believe me, a furtive fumble is the last thing on my mind at the moment. Get the frakking grille open!' The squad pursuing us was getting uncomfortably close by now, and although it was hard to make anything out with Mira's thighs clamped to my ears, I was suddenly convinced that I could hear movement down some of the other tunnels too.

'It won't move!' she called, an edge of panic entering her voice. 'It's been welded shut!'

'Oh, nads,' I said, the coin suddenly dropping as I looked up to see how she was doing, and picked out a couple of small stubs of metal on the rim of the grille. I'd seen identical protrusions not long before, where the ladder had been removed from beneath the trapdoor we'd entered the tunnels beneath the palace by, and I was suddenly prepared to bet a year's

remuneration that a similar one had stood here not long before. 'We haven't been chased here, we've been herded.'

'What are you talking about?' Mira demanded, as I handed her down, with a considerable sense of relief. All that padding might be aesthetically pleasing, but it didn't exactly make her a lightweight.

'I mean we're trapped,' I said, with as much restraint as I could muster, and drew my weapons again. There was definitely movement in several of the tunnels, but I couldn't be sure which, and how great: the echoes were overlapping too much. If I could determine one that was clear, we might still be able to make a run for it, though...

Abruptly, that hope evaporated, as the rebel squad which had attacked us on the surface trotted into the chamber, their lasguns level. They were a couple of men short, though, which gave me a certain amount of vindictive satisfaction; if I was on my way to the Golden Throne, at least I'd be taking an honour guard with me.

Mira unslung her own weapon and brought it up, but I forestalled her with a hand on the barrel.

'Stand down,' I said. 'They obviously want us alive, but I'm sure they'll change their minds if you start shooting.'

'Quite right, commissar,' someone said behind us. The voice was vaguely familiar, but it wasn't until I turned and saw the sergeant of Mira's detail emerging from another of the tunnels that everything fell into place. He was carrying his lasgun too, with an easy confidence that told me he was perfectly willing to use it the moment he felt the need. There were another three or four familiar faces standing beside him, in the same ridiculous uniform, including our vox man, his backpack transceiver still in place. All were still carrying their guns, but the satchel charges had evidently been stashed somewhere else for safe keeping. Where the rest of the squad were, I had no idea, but strongly suspected they'd paid dearly for refusing to turn their coats. The sergeant and his cronies were looking decidedly the worse for wear, their flak armour scored and dented, their faces pained. 'Milady will be a great asset when she joins us, but you, in the heart of the Imperial war machine, will be a prize beyond value.'

'Dream on,' Mira said scornfully. 'If you think I'm going to betray my world and my father, you're even more stupid than you look.'

'You'll think differently when the brood takes you in,' the sergeant assured her, and a gush of ice water seemed to sluice down my spine. There were

innumerable minor wounds among the turncoat soldiers, but all had sustained identical ones below the ribcage, marked by a trickle of blood, already clotting. I'd seen wounds like those before and searched the men's faces again. As I'd expected, they looked dazed and disorientated, but followed the lead of the sergeant. He alone seemed alert and in control, his own armour unmarred – a third-generation hybrid, then, or even later, able to pass fully for human.

Despite my mounting horror, I kept my voice steady, concealing the knowledge of what I'd deduced and looking desperately round the chamber for some avenue of escape. More people, or, to be more accurate, things that looked like people, were emerging into the light, from tunnel mouth after tunnel mouth, some armed, mostly not. Many bore visible traces of their inhuman heritage: some had an extra limb or two, tipped with razor-sharp talons, while others had skin thickened to natural armour, or were betrayed by nothing more than a subtle wrongness of posture, like Kamella, the joygirl who'd tried to bite my head off on Keffia.

'What are they?' Mira asked, curiosity and revulsion mingling on her face. 'Mutants?'

'The stories don't seem so far-fetched now, do they?' I asked, unwilling to reveal to the hybrids that I knew their true nature. I didn't know quite how concealing that knowledge would aid us, but I wasn't willing to concede any potential advantage, however small, over an enemy. One tunnel seemed to be open still, and I powered up my chainsword, nudging Mira towards it. Of course that was precisely what we were meant to do – I didn't need to be able to tap into the brood mind to know that – but pretending we were fooled, even if only for a few seconds, might just tip the balance back in our favour. It was an insanely slender chance, but it was only a few weeks since I'd taken a header through a necron warp portal, and compared to that, what I was contemplating looked positively sensible.

As I'd expected, the whole damned lot of them responded at once, taking a couple of steps forwards in eerie silence, tightening the cordon around Mira and me, while moving out of the tunnels and into the open space. Including, to my carefully concealed relief, the hybrid sergeant and his newly implanted squadmates.

'Follow my lead,' I murmured, certain that if I wasn't actually overheard, enough of the abhuman monstrosities would be able to read my lips and share the knowledge of what I'd said with their brood mates. 'Back towards

that tunnel behind us. If any of them look like shooting, drop them first.'

Mira nodded, once, tightly, her posture stiff with nerves. 'Count on it,' she said, her voice hardly wavering at all.

'Good girl,' I said, keeping up the charade and feeling that a bit of quiet encouragement at this juncture would look appropriately commissarial. 'If they rush us, just hose them down on full auto.'

Which would probably be about as effective as giving them a severe talking to, if the mob I'd survived on Keffia was anything to go by. The brood mind doesn't care about a few losses, any more than a tyrannid army does, but it's the sort of thing that would work against a mutant horde, and I was more interested in misdirecting the alien gestalt intellect facing us than giving sensible tactical advice.

It almost worked, too. We were just edging into position for my desperate gamble, the hybrid sergeant practically within reach of my humming chainblade, when I became aware of an ominous susurrations in the depths of the tunnel behind us. I turned slowly to face it, Mira following suit, the pit of my stomach knotting. I knew that sound: a chitinous exoskeleton, moving fast.

I brought up my weapons, but before I could shoot, the ghastly form of a purestrain genestealer burst from the darkened portal and flung itself upon us.



## SIX

As she got her first sight of the xenos monstrosity, Mira screamed. As well she might; if I hadn't had an image to maintain I'd probably have done the same, but as it was, I took an ineffectual cut at it with the chainsword, diving to one side to get out of its way. By great good fortune, the movement got me closer to my real objective, but there wasn't any time to exploit the fact, as the creature turned, all four arms reaching out to eviscerate me. Mira pulled the trigger of her lasgun, unleashing a burst, and I flinched, anticipating falling to friendly fire; but she was aiming down the tunnel, from which another 'stealer emerged, seconds later, bearing down on her like a Chimera at full throttle. How many more of the things there may have been lurking in the depths below the city I've no idea, but fortunately the brood mind seemed to think that one each would be more than enough to implant the two of us with its taint.<sup>21</sup>

'Drop your weapons,' the hybrid sergeant urged us. 'They won't harm you if you don't resist.'

'Yeah, right,' I said sarcastically, parrying the reaching limbs with my chainsword. It bit deep, shearing through chitin in a welter of flesh and ichor, which splattered liberally around the chamber, misting the faces of the nearest spectators. None reacted with the revulsion you'd normally expect, just continuing to watch in impassive silence, which in its own way was more unnerving than the creature in front of me. 'Just turn us into abominations like you.'<sup>22</sup>

The creature flinched, withdrawing the injured limb, and I rolled under

another just as its fist closed in a grab, missing me by millimetres. The one closing in on Mira momentarily checked its charge too, as a rash of las-bolt craters erupted on its thorax, then came on again as her lasgun fell silent, its powerpack expended. With a shriek which all but ruptured my eardrums she flung the empty weapon at the onrushing monstrosity, hoping to achieve Emperor knows what. The 'stealer swatted the mass of metal aside in an eyeblink and it clattered to the floor nearby, where the watching hybrids ignored it.

'You couldn't just have reloaded?' I asked pettishly, finding myself close enough to slash at its leg as I tried to make distance from the one attacking me, and doing so with enthusiasm. Again, the blade bit deep, and it stumbled sideways, crashing into the other 'stealer, which was still lunging desperately in my direction.

'He's carrying the spare powerpacks!' Mira snapped back, taking advantage of the ensuing confusion to slip past the entangled creatures, and glowering at the sergeant as she did so. The crowd of hybrids began to close, moving forwards to narrow the arena we fought in, and I cracked off a couple of shots from the pistol in my hand, dropping the two nearest to the tunnel the 'stealers had emerged from.

Of course he was, I thought irritably. Nobles never carried anything for themselves; that's what servants were for. 'Pick the bloody gun up!' I shouted, as she almost tripped over the thing, and she scooped it into her hand again without slackening her pace. If she'd been issued with it, she should damn well look after it, so far as I was concerned.<sup>23</sup>

The purestrains were sorting themselves out and looking seriously hacked off by now, even more so than their kind usually did.<sup>24</sup> As one, they turned to stare at me, the brood mind no doubt perceiving me as the greater threat. Well, it had got that right, I'd seen bath sponges more menacing than Mira looked at the moment, and with nothing left to lose I did the one thing I hoped they wouldn't expect: charged both creatures, bellowing 'WAAAAAAAAGHHHHH!' as loudly and enthusiastically as the orks I'd seen far too much of on Perlia. As I'd hoped, it focussed all the hybrids' attention on the purestrains, so when I veered aside, leaving the pair of them leaping to attack the spot where I suddenly wasn't, and shot the sergeant instead, none of the creatures reacted for a crucial second, taken completely by surprise.

By the time the sergeant hit the floor, I was among the crowd hemming us

in, swinging my chainsword in defensive patterns years of drilling and duelling had made so instinctive I was barely aware of them, reaping a rich and repellent harvest of severed appendages and spouting ichor. The newly implanted PDF troopers were still too dazed to react, going down without even trying to resist, and I felt a small qualm at that point, tempered with the reflection that it was not only my duty to purge them but a merciful deliverance too. As the vox op folded, his head flying off in a random direction, I let my pistol fall unheeded to the sodden rockcrete beneath my feet and grabbed the handset, praying to the Throne that it was still tuned to the same frequency as I remembered.

‘Space Marines! Help!’ I just had time to bellow, before being borne to the moisture-slick floor by a tidal wave of malformed bodies. I did my best to resist, of course, kicking and flailing wildly with the chainsword until it was torn from my grasp, and probably biting too if anything came close enough, but it was hopeless; there were simply too many of them. For a moment I could see nothing but twisted faces, their expressions blank, still moving in eerie silence. No one screamed, shouted or swore at me, and that was the most disturbing thing of all. At least until they parted, and I found myself staring into the eyes of the genestealer I’d maimed.

There have been far too many times in my long and inglorious career when I’ve been convinced, with good reason, that my last moment had come, but few of them were accompanied by such a complete sensation of absolute helplessness. In almost every other instance I’ve at least had the illusion of being able to affect the outcome, seen some last, desperate gamble which ultimately paid off, but here there was nothing at all I could do, beyond writhing ineffectually and letting rip with a volley of profanity that would have made a Slaaneshi cultist blush. It didn’t perturb the ’stealer, though; it just hissed through its thorax and opened its jaws unfeasibly wide, showing far too many teeth and adding a layer of sticky drool to the other unpleasant substances already ruining my coat.

Something moved in the back of its throat, and a thick, muscular tube emerged in place of a tongue. I flinched, anticipating the stabbing pain about to be inflicted on my chest, and, worse, the complete subversion of everything I was. Would I still feel like me at all in five minutes’ time, and if I didn’t, would I even care? I recalled the implanted troopers I’d known, and fought alongside, on Keffia. They’d seemed perfectly normal, giving no clue at all to their altered nature, until they’d revealed themselves by

turning on us in the heat of battle against their brood mates. If I became like them, with the access I had to a Space Marine Chapter and the upper echelons of the Imperial Guard, the damage my altered self could do to the Imperium's interests would be incalculable. Rather more to the point though, I was perfectly happy with myself the way I was, and the prospect of being turned into a puppet of the tyranids by an overgrown cockroach was absolutely intolerable.

Abruptly, the creature looming over me jerked and shuddered, keening loudly, even over the stuttering crackle of a lasgun on full auto, as a rain of successive las-bolts chewed their way through its armoured carapace and began making an unholy mess of its innards. Taken by surprise once again, the brood mind lost its focus for a moment, and the myriad of hands and talons holding me slackened their grip.

That was the only chance I needed. Tearing free of them, I snatched up my weapons, which, praise the Emperor, still lay on the floor within easy reach, and turned to face my deliverer. I am, by nature, something of an optimist, but I'd never dared to hope that my message would be answered so quickly, if it even got through at all.

'What the hell are you still doing here?' I asked in astonishment, laying about me with the chainblade again and popping off random las-bolts, certain that in a crowd this dense they'd find some kind of mark.

Mira paused for a second, before ejecting the spent powerpack from her lasgun and snapping a fresh one in, whereupon she began firing short, precise bursts at the second 'stealer, presumably having discovered just how quickly staying on full auto would deplete it.

'Thank you for saving my neck, milady,' she said sarcastically. 'Oh, think nothing of it, commissar.' She was standing astride the sergeant's body, which at least explained where the reloads had come from. No doubt she'd carry her own from now on, if she still felt the urge to play soldiers.

'Run now, thanks later,' I said, cutting my way through to her side. 'But I'm definitely pleased to see you.'

'I'm flattered,' she said, backing towards the nearest tunnel mouth and continuing to pepper the purestrain with las-bolts. This one, however, was made of sterner stuff than its fellow and continued to advance inexorably, hopping awkwardly on its injured leg, no doubt aided by the fact that Mira kept having to shift her aim to keep the swarm of hybrids off our backs too. If the ones with weapons opened up we'd both be dead in seconds, but to



my amazement and relief they continued to hold their fire, still believing that they had the advantage of numbers, and could eventually take us alive to become part of their conjoined mind. They were probably right about that too, closing in around us with a speed and precision I wouldn't have believed possible if I hadn't seen what they were capable of before, and as heedless of their own losses as the tyranids themselves. For every one that fell to our las-bolts and my whining chainblade, another would step in, and it could only be a matter of time before we were overwhelmed and brought down.

I shot another hybrid standing between us and the tunnel mouth, but even as I did so I could tell it was too late: that way out was blocked now, the silent crowd pressing in on all sides. For the second time in a handful of minutes, I was facing the imminent certainty of my own death – or at least the death of everything I defined myself by.

'It's been an honour to serve with you, colonel,' I said, feeling that my last act might as well be to boost Mira's morale. I'd hardly been a model commissar, Emperor only knows, but at least I could die like one.

'We both know that's a big fat lie,' she replied grimly, as her last powerpack ran dry despite her attempts to husband it, and she began to use the heavy lasgun as a club, 'but I appreciate the thought.'

'You're welcome,' I said, my laspistol giving up too, and swept the chainsword at the 'stealer. We only had seconds left now, but I was determined to take as many of the abominations with me as I could. Time slowed and stretched, as it generally seems to under this sort of circumstance, and I found myself suddenly aware of a rising shriek, which grew in intensity and volume. I flicked my gaze apprehensively at the nearest tunnel mouth, anticipating the sudden appearance of some fresh horror, a screamer-killer perhaps<sup>25</sup> – nothing would surprise me now... except for what actually happened next. With a rumble like thunder, and a sudden burst of ozone which left the hairs on my arms tingling upright,<sup>26</sup> the roof over our heads vaporised in a burst of light so dazzling I was left blinking after-images from my retina for several minutes. Shards of carbonised debris pattered around us, but fortunately nothing of any significant size actually hit; the turbo laser must have struck the ground above us full on, to leave nothing larger than a few handfuls of gravel behind.

'What the hell was that?' Mira yelled, as the noise suddenly redoubled

without the intervening layer of brick, earth and rockcrete.

‘It’s the Thunderhawk!’ I bellowed back, recognising the distinctive silhouette as it flashed past overhead, its shadow momentarily eclipsing the open pit we now found ourselves in. A second later, the screaming of its engine was suddenly punctuated by the distinctive staccato rhythm of heavy bolter fire, and the hybrids scattered, racing for whatever refuge they might find in the surrounding tunnels, while the genestealer exploded messily just before closing to contact with us. ‘And the Adeptus Astartes!’

The unmistakable bulk of the Terminators I’d seen taking the heretic artillery position apart were lumbering into position around the rim of the pit, pouring fire from their storm bolters into it, while the hybrids fled and died in droves. This was hardly a comfortable position to be in, even given the phenomenal accuracy of the Space Marines, but they picked off their targets without even coming close to us, and in any case the firing died away about as quickly as you might expect, given how rapidly they ran out of targets.

Mira and I stared at one another, grinning like idiots, not quite able to believe how narrowly we’d escaped with our lives and souls intact.

‘It seems I owe you an apology,’ she said after a moment, her generous décolletage heaving with emotion. ‘I should have listened to your advice and stayed behind.’

‘Under the circumstances,’ I conceded, ‘I can only be grateful that you didn’t.’ Now they’d run out of things to kill, the Terminators were advancing into the pit, mainly by the simple expedient of jumping, which was creating a series of minor tremors in the ground. How they were intending to get up again, I had no idea.<sup>27</sup>

Mira eyed me speculatively. ‘I’m sure we can find some way of making it up to each other,’ she said, in a manner which made it abundantly clear just what kind of reparation she had in mind. I nodded, the prospect seeming distinctly appealing at that point, and Emperor knows I felt I’d earned it.

‘I’m sure we can,’ I said, then turned to the Terminator in charge, easily recognisable by the powerblade he was carrying along with his storm bolter. ‘Thank you, sergeant. Your intervention was most timely.’

‘Your death while a guest of the Reclaimers would have been an affront to the honour of our Chapter,’ he told me, the sepulchral tones of his kind issuing from the vox unit of his helmet. I was used to the timbre by this time, but Mira was clearly startled, flinching visibly as he began to speak.

‘We made what haste we could to the source of your signal.’

‘Then I’ll do my best to keep your honour upheld,’ I said, feeling oddly disconcerted by the dispassionate statement. The other Space Marines were fanning out, weapons at the ready, poking at the fallen bodies of the genestealers and the hybrids. I gestured to the remains of the nearest, drawing the sergeant’s attention to it, although I had no doubt that the voxes built into the Space Marines’ helmets were already humming with the news. ‘Especially now things have become a little more complicated.’

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



*Editorial Note:*

*The Reclaimers' arrival on Viridia had proven to be as brisk and decisive as intervention by an Adeptus Astartes Chapter generally is, and news of their coming spread rapidly. Though, in those first few hours, their presence had been confined entirely to the planetary capital, the effect on the rest of the planet had been profound; something Cain, as usual, doesn't bother to mention, any more than he does the rest of the retaking of Fidelis.*

*Since my readers cannot be presumed to share his lack of interest in the bigger picture, the following extract has been appended.*

From *The Virus of Betrayal: The Cleansing of Viridia and its Aftermath* by Lady Ottaline Melmoth, 958.M41.

The arrival of the Adeptus Astartes was as welcome to the loyal servants of the Emperor as it was startling, many of the faithful taking their advent as a sign of His special interest in our blessed world. Indeed, many services of thanksgiving were begun in temples and chapels around the globe even before their first battle was concluded. Not that this made any difference to the fervour of the celebrants: for them, the coming battle to cleanse Viridia of heresy and worse seemed little more than a formality, since the whole galaxy knows that His Space Marines are the strong right hand of the Emperor Himself, and that once they embark on a quest in His holy name, the task is as good as done.<sup>28</sup>

The Space Marines made their first landing in Fidelis, at the palace of

Governor DuPanya, losing no time in breaking the heretical siege lines which had kept the Emperor's anointed custodian of the planet confined and powerless to intervene directly in the constant turmoil of civil strife which had done so much to mar the fair face of Viridia. This done, he immediately took up the reins of his interrupted stewardship, while the Adeptus Astartes swept on to even greater victories. The cathedral, always a beacon of hope in those desperate times, and therefore under constant threat from the dissident elements, was liberated within the hour, as was the shrine of the Omnissiah, freeing the tech-priests to begin ministering to the city's wounded machine-spirits with the utmost dispatch.

Perhaps the most desperate battles were those to eliminate the artillery batteries which the rebels had set up to prevent a mass landing of Imperial Guard troops, which, if left in place, would have taken a terrible toll in lives and resources. The crucial importance of this assignment can be deduced from the fact that the mission to remove one was led by the commander of the Astartes expeditionary force and his personal guard, while the task of placing a beacon to guide the teleporting strike team which destroyed the other was entrusted to none other than Commissar Cain, accompanied by Colonel Mira DuPanya, the governor's youngest daughter and a formidable warrior in her own right.

It need hardly be said that both missions ended in unqualified success, with the complete destruction of the designated targets, although one was to have unexpected and serious consequences. DuPanya and Cain's reconnaissance *en route* to their destination had revealed the true nature of the enemy we were facing, and, for the first time, the full extent of the hideous conspiracy gnawing away at the fabric of our society (quite literally, it seemed) became clear.



## SEVEN

The next few days passed in a predictable blur of briefings, conferences and occasional bloodshed, as the full extent of the genestealer cult's reach became clear. Not to put too fine a point on it, the bloody things were everywhere, from the local Adeptus Arbites<sup>29</sup> to the sanitation workers' guild, and winking them out was a job I felt heartily glad hadn't landed in my lap. Fortunately the Guard troopships had arrived in-system on schedule, bringing a mixed bag of Tallarn, Vostroyan and Caledonian regiments with them, so there was no shortage of outsiders unquestionably free of the xenos taint to start rounding up suspects and begin the screening process.

'The trouble is,' Mira said, on one of her periodic social visits to my quarters, 'that means pretty much the entire population.' She shrugged, setting up interesting ripples in the fabric of the gown she was almost wearing, and leaned forwards to study the regicide board on the table between us, giving me the opportunity to fully appreciate the effect. She was an enthusiastic, if somewhat direct, player, an attitude she seemed to bring to all her recreational activities, and despite us having got off on the wrong foot, a surprisingly congenial companion. At least for the short time I expected to remain on Viridia. I could see her innate self-centredness would grow wearying after a while,<sup>30</sup> although I suppose, given her upbringing, that was hardly her fault.

'The crucial thing is to purge the most influential institutions as quickly as possible,' I told her, drawing on what I remembered of the Keffia

Campaign, in which all the policy stuff had taken place so far above my head it was practically in the stratosphere: in those relatively carefree days, all I'd had to worry about was rounding up the defaulters, watching our Earthshakers lob shells at an enemy too distant to shoot back, and avoiding Colonel Mostrue's occasional attempts to manoeuvre me into the firing line. (Apart from getting sucked into a stand-up fight with a horde of genestealer hybrids uncomfortably reminiscent of the one Mira and I had so recently faced together, of course.) 'Starting with the Guardians and the PDF.' Because the sooner the Viridians could begin cleaning up their own mess, the sooner I'd be able to get back to brigade headquarters and away from anything wanting to kill me; at least until General Lokris found another insanely risky errand to lob in my direction.

The Reclaimers would hardly want to hang around once the initial flurry of action had subsided, and the back of the rebellion had been pretty much broken already. There were still a few units of PDF mutineers out there, either composed of hybrids and implanted humans under the sway of the brood mind, or clinging to the ideological twaddle they'd been fed to get them to join the revolution in the first place and unwilling to admit they'd been duped by xenos, but they were hardly going to last long against Guardsmen, let alone the Emperor's chosen warriors. Gries had made no secret of the fact that he intended pulling out to look for a more interesting war as soon as the Reclaimers had finished cleansing the offworld habs, and when the Astartes left Viridia my assignment would go with them, as there would hardly be any need for them to continue liaising with the Imperial Guard.

In the meantime, I was far more comfortable than I'd any right to expect. Mira had prevailed on her father to find me a guest room in the palace, citing the need to keep me on hand as a military advisor with experience of genestealer infestations, and if he was aware of her real motives the governor was enough of a gentleman to affect ignorance of them. In fact, the accommodation was too luxurious, if anything, and I'd taken to sleeping on one of the couches, the bed being too soft for me, at least for its intended purpose.

'I suppose so.' She turned one of my ecclesiarchs, effectively surrounding the king with her own pieces, and sat back, looking smug. 'My game, I think.'

'It looks that way,' I said. In truth I could probably have turned it round

again in a couple more moves, but the ensuing end game would have been tediously protracted, and Mira's inevitable sulk at being made to look foolish would have put a damper on the rest of the evening. Whereas resigning now would leave her in a good mood, and ready to move on to the more enjoyable pursuits we both knew were the real reason for her visit.

So it was with somewhat mixed feelings that I heard the door of my suite bang closed, followed by the unmistakable clatter of an overstuffed kitbag falling to the carpet. Mira's eyes widened, in much the same fashion as they had when she first caught sight of the genestealers, and even before a familiar odour drifted past my nostrils I would have put a considerable sum of money on what I'd find when I turned round.

'Jurgen,' I said, a degree of warmth which surprised me elbowing its way into my voice. 'How in Terra's name did you get here?' He looked just as unprepossessing as I remembered, as if a nurgling had somehow become entangled with a random collection of Guardsmen's kit, but I was delighted to see him again nevertheless.

'On one of the troopships,' my aide said, picking his nose thoughtfully, taking the rhetorical question as literally as he did everything else. 'Then I got on the first shuttle down. The general wasn't happy about it, but I told him I was with you, so they found room.'

'I'll bet he did,' I said, knowing all too well how obdurate Jurgen could be in pursuit of whatever he conceived to be his duty, irrespective of any difference in rank or status between him and the unfortunate target of his ire. I've no doubt that without the protection the quasi-commissarial credentials his position as my aide conferred, he would have been shot on the spot for insubordination innumerable times. I indicated my guest, who seemed even more astonished that I apparently knew this apparition than she had been by his original appearance. 'This is Milady DuPanya, daughter of his Excellency, and a senior officer in the PDF. Mira, my aide, Gunner Jurgen.'

'Pleased to meet you, miss,' Jurgen said, mercifully too distant to proffer a hand. Unable to reconcile her evident civilian status with what I'd told him about her military rank, he raised a hand to the straggle of lank hair escaping from under his helmet in something between a wave and a salute, before scratching his head in perplexity. 'I thought you were with the Space Marines, sir.'

'Liaising with them,' I said. 'But the main PDF command centre's here, in



the palace, which means it'll be the centre of the Guard operation as well.'

'I see,' Jurgen said, nodding judiciously. 'So you need to be here, really. For this liaison thing to work.'

'It's a lot more convenient,' Mira said, stifling giggles. 'For the liaison thing.'

'Yes, it is,' I said, a little more shortly than I'd intended. Jurgen and I had been through a lot together, and he'd already saved my life more times than I could count. I was used to people judging him by his unprepossessing exterior, but Mira's thinly veiled mockery raised my hackles. Perhaps fortunately, they were as thick-skinned as one another in their own fashion, and she remained as oblivious to my disapproval as Jurgen did to her amusement. 'We'll have to find you some quarters.'

'That won't be a problem,' Jurgen said, rummaging in his kitbag. 'I've got a bedroll.' He started looking round the lavishly appointed drawing room for somewhere to spread it out.

'I'm glad to see you're as prepared as ever,' I said, trying not to picture the shambles he'd reduce the elegant chamber to within a day of settling in, not to mention the disruption his presence would cause to my continuing to liaise as happily as I had with a particular honorary colonel of the Household Regiment. 'But I'm sure we can make you a little more comfortable than that.'

'Of course we can,' Mira said, rallying at last and recomposing her features. 'The guest suites in this wing have servants' quarters attached.' She indicated a locked door on an inner wall, which I'd assumed on moving in simply connected to an adjoining suite like my own, for the benefit of guests needing a bit more space to sprawl. 'You can use those.'

'I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble, miss,' Jurgen said, apparently under the impression she was proposing to take care of the matter herself.

Mira shook her head. 'It's no trouble,' she assured him, with a commendably straight face. 'The main door from the corridor should still be unlocked, for the cleaners.' For whom, though I'd never seen them, I felt a sudden pang of sympathy. 'And we can get the majordomo to open that one in the morning.'

She glanced a wordless question at me as she indicated the connecting door, and I nodded. Despite his slovenly appearance, and the miasma of ripe socks which hung about him, Jurgen's discretion was considerable; he wouldn't intrude without good reason. Not to mention that, with a

genestealer cult lurking in the woodwork, I'd sleep a great deal more soundly knowing my aide and his lasgun were within earshot. I always kept my own weapons to hand, of course, but it was surprisingly comforting to know that once again I had back-up I could rely on completely. In fact it's hardly an exaggeration to say that I only fully appreciated how much I'd missed it once Jurgen materialised so unexpectedly in my quarters.

'Then, if there's nothing else, sir, I'll turn in,' my aide said, stooping to gather up his kit.

'Probably best,' I told him. 'Now the Guard have arrived, we're in for a busy day tomorrow.'

'Almost certainly,' Mira agreed, as the door clicked closed, leaving only the lingering trace of his presence hanging in the air like an odiferous phantom. She raised a speculative eyebrow at me. 'Perhaps we'd better get on with some liaising while we still can.'

Well, I hadn't been wrong about the effect the sudden arrival of a few score thousand Guardsmen was going to have on the planet, and my peace of mind. Now there was an actual Imperial Guard force in the system to coordinate things with, Gries began voicing me rather more frequently than once a day, and at greater length than the terse exchanges we'd grown used to, which had largely consisted of exchanging the tally of 'stealer spawn bagged by his Space Marines (high) and Orten's PDF (pitifully low) since the last communiqué. Given how compromised the PDF were, Gries had decided to set up the Reclaimers' operational headquarters at the Adeptus Mechanicus shrine, where, I gathered, he and his men had been made as welcome as outsiders ever were by the disciples of the Omnissiah. As yet I hadn't ventured across the city to join them, feeling that my duty required me to stay as close as possible to the PDF command bunker, and the rather less spartan accommodation offered by the palace.

Within a couple of days of the Guard's arrival, however, I was beginning to find the prospect of a bit of Mechanicus austerity considerably more appealing. Governor DuPanya had kindly put the bunker under his home at the disposal of the expeditionary force,<sup>31</sup> which meant I was dealing with general staff matters pretty much non-stop. Predictably, everyone from regimental commanders and their commissars on up wanted to meet me, get my opinion on matters I'd never heard of and ask if I could perhaps suggest to the Adeptus Astartes that they move these pressing concerns to the top of

their To Do list. If it hadn't been for Jurgen deflecting the majority of these requests with his usual combination of stubbornness and literal minded adherence to protocol, I'd never have been off the vox to Gries at all. Even Mira's presence was starting to seem scant compensation for the never-ending litany of requests, complaints and data-shuffling.

I had no doubt, from what I'd seen of the Space Marines during our voyage here, that their patience with this kind of confusion would be limited at best, so you'll no doubt appreciate my surprise when Gries voxed one morning to request a meeting with the governor, and the senior Guard officers, at his earliest convenience. As it happened I was having breakfast with Mira at the time, and she looked at me quizzically over the plate she'd just stuffed with salt grox, coddled eggs and some local species of smoked fish.

'What do you suppose he wants?' she asked, and I shrugged, quietly fascinated as usual by the amount of food she seemed able to pack away without any noticeable ill-effects.

'I suppose we'll find out soon enough,' I said, sipping my cup of tanna<sup>32</sup> gratefully. Jurgen had brought a supply with him, and I hadn't realised quite how much I was missing the stuff until it was back. 'We needed to get him in for a joint strategy meeting anyway. Probably a lot easier if he thinks it was his idea in the first place.'

'Perhaps,' Mira agreed, slightly indistinctly. 'But why wouldn't he come if you asked him anyway? I thought we were all supposed to be cooperating.'

'Adeptus Astartes like to cooperate on their terms,' I told her, punctuating my words with sips of the fragrant liquid. I had no doubt that they were zealous servants of Him on Earth, but whatever alchemy made them more than human undeniably set them apart. Perhaps if I hadn't been so affected, both physically and mentally, by my experiences on Interitus Prime, I might have interacted with them to a greater extent on our journey here, and found more common ground than I had, but somehow I doubted that. The closest thing to a personal connection I'd been able to forge was with Drumon, and he'd been more interested in the necrons and their infernal devices than anything approaching the social niceties.

'Who doesn't?' Mira asked, reasonably enough. I couldn't think of an answer to that which didn't sound trite, or smug, so I took refuge in my breakfast and simply shrugged.

To give the governor his due, he lost no time in setting up the conference Gries had requested. As I entered the command bunker, the taste of tanna still fresh in my mouth, I was pleasantly surprised to see Orten there, apparently at DuPanya's invitation. Having him on hand as a source of local knowledge would be useful, and save us the bother of rebriefing him later in the unlikely event of us needing the forces he commanded for anything. I nodded an affable greeting and exchanged a few words, noting with quiet amusement how my friendliness towards him seemed to change the attitude of a number of the Guard officers present from indifference or barely concealed disdain to a slightly forced cordiality. They would have had little enough time for the PDF, even if a fair proportion of it hadn't been shooting at their men, of course, but under the circumstances, I wouldn't have been all that surprised if at least some of them hadn't suspected Orten of being a hybrid himself.<sup>33</sup>

Rather more surprising was Mira's presence, wearing another of her wedding-cake uniforms, but at least this time she'd had enough sense to pack the cleavage away where it wouldn't distract anyone. She smiled at me as I came in, although if any of the assembled officers noticed, they had the good grace not to appear to take it for anything other than a perfectly natural infatuation with the dashing hero I was popularly supposed to be. I made my way over to the girl and her father, acknowledging the greetings of the Guard officers I was acquainted with, or who wished to foster the impression that I was.

'Governor,' I said, greeting him first, as protocol demanded, before nodding to Mira. 'Colonel. An unexpected pleasure.' Which it was. She'd said nothing about tagging along when she'd left my chambers an hour or so before, and must have got changed remarkably quickly, at least by her standards. Many of the Imperial officers milling around us seemed confused by her presence, as even if they accepted her military rank as real, which I doubted any of them did, it was by far the most junior in the room. She smiled again, but before she could reply, DuPanya cut in, as dextrously as I might have pinked an opponent with my chainsword.

'My daughter is here as my potential successor, commissar,'<sup>34</sup> he said. 'In these days of uncertainty, it's important for her to be kept abreast of policy matters, in case she has to take over the reins of government.'

'Of course,' I said, nodding gravely, as if there was any government worth a damn on Viridia at the moment other than jumpy Guardsmen with

lasguns, who'd apply whichever fragments of the occupation code<sup>35</sup> they remembered, so long as nothing or no one looked like threatening the safety of their squadmates, and use their weapons indiscriminately if their paranoia was sufficiently tweaked. (Which, under the right, or wrong, circumstances, wouldn't take much, as a rule.) 'But I'm sure we all hope it won't come to that.' I certainly would if I was a Viridian, anyway.

'Quite.' DuPanya glanced at his daughter, apparently picking up my implied meaning without effort, and moved the discussion on to safer topics. 'What do you think the Astartes want to discuss?'

'I've no idea,' I admitted, trying not to sound as though it rankled. We were, after all, supposed to be on the same side, but, as I've mentioned before, the Astartes were a law unto themselves, and confided as much or as little in their allies as seemed to suit them. At least, that was true of the Reclaimers, and I've no reason to suspect that it doesn't hold true for the other Chapters as well.<sup>36</sup> 'But I'm sure we'll find out soon enough.'

We didn't have long to wait, either. At the appointed hour, almost to the second, the synchronised clash of armoured feet against rockcrete I'd come to associate with the Space Marines echoed through the bunker, shaking a thin film of dust free of the support beams to sprinkle everyone lightly with synthetic dandruff, and all eyes turned to the main doorway. After a moment or two, in which the clattering and the vibration increased to levels just short of uncomfortable, Gries appeared, flanked by a couple of his companions from the squad which had accompanied him before.<sup>37</sup> A moment later, I had a real surprise. Drumon was trailing a pace or two behind them. Even if he'd still been wearing his helmet, which was hanging from a pouch-filled belt at his waist, next to a holstered plasma pistol, I would have recognised him instantly by the metal claw at his back, the jointed arm to which it was attached folded neatly away parallel to his spine. He was carrying a scabbarded sword on the opposite side to his pistol, with an activation rune of some kind in the pommel. He was evidently used to employing them in tandem, in the same fashion I used my chainsword and sidearm, and I smiled involuntarily, amused to have found another small thing which the towering Techmarine and I appeared to have in common.

Catching my eye, Drumon returned the smile and nodded a greeting, which clearly astonished those among the assembled officers who noticed it even more than it did me. In fact, I was so taken aback, I took a moment to

register the red-robed tech-priest gliding smoothly in his wake, like a gretchin after an ork.<sup>38</sup> I had no idea what the tech-priest's presence portended, but I was pretty sure it was nothing good.

‘Captain.’ DuPanya stepped forwards to greet Gries, who glanced down at him, then removed his helmet, hanging it at his hip as Drumon had done. Seeing the two men together, I was put incongruously in mind of an adult, tilting his head to listen patiently to an importunate child. ‘To what do we owe this unexpected pleasure?’

‘We have been conferring with the acolytes of the Omnissiah,’ Gries explained, without preamble. ‘Magos Yaffel believes he has identified the source of the genestealer taint.’

That got everyone's attention, as I'm sure you can imagine. The room, which had gone quiet enough when the Astartes appeared, stilled completely. I could hear little but the susurrations of my own breathing, and I'm pretty sure a few of the others stopped even that for a moment. Fortunately, before anyone could turn blue, Drumon and the tech-priest commandeered the hololith, coaxing it into life with a few dextrous touches of their ceramite gauntlets and mechadendrites respectively, while murmuring the litany of activation. We all crowded round, trying to look as though we weren't using our elbows on purpose to obtain a better view, and I did my best to ignore the proximity of Mira, who was taking advantage of the huddle to get considerably closer to me than decorum would normally permit with others present.

‘I'm sure you recognise this,’ the tech-priest began, in the reedy tones of a voxcaster in need of repair. Like many of his brethren, he'd apparently replaced his vocal cords, and a great deal else, with augmetic systems. As he spoke, he moved slightly, oscillating back and forth like a drunkard attempting to keep pace with the floor; after a moment or two I caught a glimpse of metal beneath his robe, and the coin dropped. The lower half of his body had been removed completely, leaving his torso resting on a metal plate, which in turn was supported by a thin steel tube, attached to a single, fat-tired wheel. No doubt there was a gyroscope somewhere to impart stability, but, if so, it seemed barely adequate to the task, necessitating constant minor adjustments of balance to keep him from toppling over.

Everyone nodded as an image of the Viridian stellar system appeared, the planet we were standing on marked with the green rune which, somewhat optimistically, identified it as now being safely back in Imperial hands.

Most of the significant offworld hubs were similarly tagged. This was not surprising. The Reclaimers left behind on the *Revenant* had hardly been idle while the war on the ground was going on, and had retaken the largest rebel stronghold with an ease which had disinclined most of the others to make a fight of it, while the strike cruiser swatted any of the System Defence boats which failed to strike their colours as casually as it had taken care of the one which had been foolish enough to attack us when we'd first emerged from the warp. Only a few red icons marked die-hard dissidents, which quite effectively pinpointed the offworld sites where the 'stealers had managed to gain a significant foothold, and I was pleasantly surprised at how meagre they were.<sup>39</sup>

'A hundred and forty-seven years ago,' the tech-priest went on, apparently indifferent to our nods and murmurs, 'a flare of warp energy was detected in the halo.'<sup>40</sup> Analysis at the time suggested an object of considerable mass had emerged, and a System Defence boat was dispatched to investigate. Perhaps fortunately for them, however, the object disappeared back into the immaterium before they were able to provide more than a few long-range sensor records.' Drumon did something at the control lectern, and the image changed to an indistinct blob which looked like nothing so much as a diseased tuber to me. There seemed to be nothing particularly threatening about it, but DuPanya's face had paled. Mira glanced at her father, looking concerned about someone else for the first time since I'd met her.

'The space hulk,' the governor said heavily, and that got a reaction, you can be sure. Gries's shattered visage twitched into the semblance of a frown, and he gazed at DuPanya like a schola tutor faced with a pupil stumbling over the catechism.

'You were aware of this?' he asked, his voice rumbling through the bunker like a distant earthquake.

DuPanya nodded. 'Of course,' he said, recovering fast. 'But as it was only in-system for a few hours, we felt the risk it posed to our security had been negligible. We kept the SDF on alert for a while, but with nothing to shoot at, there didn't seem much point in prolonging the watch.'

Concealing my surprise that he was apparently into his second century, which I suppose I should have expected, given what I'd already deduced about the nobility's fondness for juvenat treatments, I nodded judiciously. 'That's understandable,' I said, wondering for the first time if Mira was really quite as young as she appeared, and deciding I didn't much care



either way. 'If there were greenskins aboard, I'm sure you would have noticed.'

Several of the Imperial officers smiled at the understatement, an ork invasion hardly being noted for its subtlety, but it seemed Gries had as little time for flippancy as he had for anything else which wasn't about slaughtering the enemies of the Emperor. 'Such complacency was negligent in the extreme,' he said.

DuPanya flushed. 'We could hardly remain on alert indefinitely,' he pointed out, a trifle defensively. 'The populace would have been panicked, to no positive effect. And it's not as if our defences were set up to counter this kind of insidious infiltration in any case.'

Gries didn't have to say 'Perhaps they should have been'. His silence was emphatic enough. To dispel the tension hanging in the air, and forestall any recrimination which was likely to be ripened by it, I stepped in to restore our unity, like the good little commissar I was supposed to be.

'All of which rather begs the question of how the 'stealers got planetside at all,' I said, as if I really wanted to know the answer. 'Magos, I'm sure a man of your erudition has been able to work it out?'

The wobbling half-man looked as pleased as it was possible to with a face composed largely of metal. The acolytes of the Omnissiah are supposed to be above petty human emotions, but I've noticed they seem as susceptible to flattery as anyone else.

'The balance of probabilities would seem to favour an opportunistic boarding by mineral prospectors in search of booty,' he piped, his thin tones in marked contrast to those of the Space Marine captain. 'The halo is full of small vessels, which the SDF crew would have found extremely difficult to distinguish at the range they were, given the masking effect of the hulk and the profusion of cometary debris registering on their auspex.'

That sounded plausible enough to me. It would only take a handful of people to be implanted for the taint to take root, growing stronger with each generation of hybrids, and the crew of a small vessel would do nicely for starters. Particularly if they had room aboard for a purestrain or two, to hurry the process along a bit.

'Which raises another alarming possibility,' I said. 'Given the amount of cargo entering and leaving the system, and the number of vessels carrying it, how sure can we be that some of these abominations haven't taken passage to other parts of the sector, intent on spreading their corruption as



widely as they can?’ The expressions of the senior officers surrounding me were all the indication I needed of just how much none of them liked that idea.

‘That seems unlikely,’ Drumon interjected, to everyone’s visible relief, ‘although it would be prudent to send an astropathic message to the appropriate authorities in the nearby systems.’

‘I concur,’ Gries agreed. ‘Genestealer cults generally remain focussed on subverting one world at a time.’ Well, I supposed he’d know, being the greatest local expert on the enemies of the Imperium, and the best way of scraping them off its collective bootsole.

‘A more pressing concern is the hulk itself,’ Yaffel put in, with the unmistakable air of a man dragging everyone back to the point. ‘Wherever it goes, it will continue to infect inhabited systems.’

‘Not to mention the ones it’s already been through,’ I said. I glanced round the bunker, finally managing to catch the eye of the senior intelligence analyst among the general staffers. ‘We’ll need to search the records, try to find other sightings that match—’

‘We have already identified it,’ Drumon assured me, the faint trace of amusement I recalled seeing aboard the *Revenant* during my convalescence surfacing briefly again. ‘It’s the *Spawn of Damnation*, first sighted in 447.M36, in the Spinward Drift. Or, at least, first sighted by anyone who survived to make a report. Its movements are as well known as any piece of warp flotsam.’

‘Well, that’s a comfort, at least,’ I said, trying to sound as though I meant it, and hadn’t been disconcerted by the name. Who chose it, and why they can’t call these things something a little more cheerful, is beyond me.<sup>41</sup> ‘It’s a shame we can’t warn whoever it’s heading for next.’

‘Unfortunately, given the nature of the warp, such a prediction cannot be made,’ Yaffel said, not quite managing to inject an edge of regret into his mechanical monotone. ‘However, it may be possible to follow the hulk to its next destination.’

‘How?’ DuPanya asked, quite reasonably under the circumstances, while Mira merely pulled a face at me, and made a surprisingly vulgar gesture indicative of mental derangement. Privately, I agreed with her, but if the Astartes were taking this nonsense seriously, the least we could do was hear the fellow out.

‘By entering the warp at the same point the hulk did,’ Yaffel said, ‘and

following the current. We've examined the logs of numerous cargo vessels which entered and left the Viridia System over the last century and a half, and the indications are that the flow of the immaterium in this region of space and time have remained reasonably stable.'

'Reasonably stable being something of a relative term,' Drumon interjected again, dryly. 'Following the wrong current will take us to a different system entirely. But we have a good Navigator aboard the *Revenant*, and he considers the gamble a reasonable one.'

'Not to mention the calculations I've made, which should narrow down the possibilities considerably,' Yaffel added.

'Then, forgive me if I'm wrong,' DuPanya said, 'are we to infer that you intend trying to track down the *Spawn of Damnation* in your own ship?'

'We do,' Gries said flatly. His head turned, sweeping his gaze across the assembled officers. 'The Imperial Guard should be capable of resolving matters on Viridia now the back of the rebellion has been broken. Once the operations we currently have under way are concluded, we will depart.'

'You'll be missed,' I said diplomatically, stepping in before any of the Guard officers could say something unfortunate that might lead to hurt feelings or worse. 'But we must all do our duty, wherever it leads.'

Looking back, I sometimes wonder whether if I'd just had the sense to hold my tongue at that point I would have avoided a great deal of unpleasantness, but somehow I doubt it. Gries had clearly made his mind up about the whole thing before he voxed me that morning, and a captain of the *Astartes* is a hard man to say no to. His gaze settled on me.

'Commissar. You may accompany us, if you wish. The *Spawn of Damnation* is a threat to the whole sector, and will continue to be so until it is neutralised. No doubt the higher echelons of the Imperial Guard would value your report of our actions.'

'I've no doubt they would,' I said smoothly, while trying desperately to think of a plausible reason not to get dragged into this lunatic quest. None came to mind, and, once again, I found myself cursing my unfounded reputation. How could I possibly refuse, with a roomful of generals and senior commissars staring at me, mostly with undisguised envy? I shrugged, determined to make the best of it. 'My orders were to liaise with you for as long as you deem necessary, so of course I'm happy to continue. I'll instruct my aide to make the arrangements for our departure.'

'Very well.' Gries nodded, turned and strode out of the bunker without

another word, followed by the rest of the Space Marines and the wobbling tech-priest. A babble of voices broke out, incredulity and outrage the predominant notes, and I became aware of Mira clutching my arm, her face set.

‘Ciaphas,’ she said firmly, ‘we need to talk. About *us*.’

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## EIGHT

Jurgen took the news of our imminent departure in his usual phlegmatic fashion, although I'm bound to say that I was less than enthusiastic at the prospect of getting back aboard a starship so soon after making planetfall. But then, for Jurgen, orders were sacrosanct. I sometimes suspected that he believed the chain of command to extend unbroken all the way to the Golden Throne, so even matters as mundane as the appointment of the day's latrine orderly were imbued with the unassailable authority of the Emperor Himself. At any event, he simply nodded and busied himself about packing my effects with no more than a simple 'Very good, sir. Will you be wanting a bit of lunch before we leave?'

'I believe so,' I told him, after considering the matter. I'd lost little time in requisitioning a comm-bead from the newly arrived Guard contingent, to replace the one the necrons had vaporised along with the *Omniissiah's Bounty*, so I was able to follow the Space Marines' preparations for departure without bothering Gries, which probably came as a relief to both of us. Recovering their active combat squads, who were scattered across half the system, was going to take a little time, even for warriors of their formidable efficiency, and, true to the code of their Chapter, none of them would be willing to break contact with a still-living enemy and leave the task they'd been allocated half-done.

Lunch would also be a good opportunity to take my leave of Mira (who I'd managed to detach myself from in the command bunker as quickly and tactfully as possible), on reasonably good terms. Her words had shaken me,

which, given some of the perils I've faced in the Emperor's name, you might find surprising, but at least you know where you are with a charging ork. When a woman tells you she wants to talk 'about us', the one thing you can be sure of is that no amount of combat experience is going to get you out unscathed.

To my surprise, and, I must confess, relief, however, my invitation went unacknowledged, save by a sour-faced ladies' maid, who informed me with mingled relish and disdain that her mistress was 'not available.' Remembering the sulky expression on Mira's face as I'd prised her from my arm and found urgent business with the intelligence analyst I'd tried to speak to before, I could well believe it. It had been obvious to me from the moment we'd first got involved with one another that our liaison would be as fleeting as all the others I'd had over the years, my position and duty to the Commissariat making it inevitable that I'd be moving on to another war as soon as the situation on Viridia had stabilised, but Mira's little world had always revolved around her, and I was beginning to realise, somewhat belatedly, that she wasn't going to take kindly to my departure on anyone's terms but her own.

Oh well, too bad, I thought. Heiress to a planet she may have been,<sup>42</sup> but I couldn't see that having much weight with Gries if she tried to argue him into leaving me behind. For a moment the mental picture that conjured up, of the petulant young aristocrat haranguing the Space Marine captain, raised a fleeting smile, before I dismissed it and turned my attention to more pressing matters. 'See if they've got any of those little lizard things, and some of that smoked fish pâté, in the kitchen,' I told Jurgen. The rations aboard the *Revenant* were adequate, of course, but fairly basic, the little comforts of life generally coming low on the list of priorities of a Space Marine, and I intended to make the most of the skills of the governor's chef while I still had the chance. 'Otherwise, use your initiative. And get something for yourself, too.'

'Very good, sir,' he said, and departed as quickly as he could without compromising the air of dignity he felt appropriate to someone in the exalted position of a commissar's personal aide, and which he endeavoured to maintain at all times, in blissful ignorance of the fact that it was completely invisible to everyone but him. He returned a short while later with a large covered tray, the contents of which he laid out for me, and a thermal bag leaking steam, which, to my unspoken relief, he bore off to his

own quarters, there being few things in the galaxy more likely to curtail the appetite than watching (or listening to) Jurgen stuffing his face.

After concluding our meals there was nothing much else to do, since we had little enough kit between us, and Jurgen had already stowed it, so I found myself in the unwelcome and novel position of time hanging heavily on my hands. I busied myself with makework, visiting the bunker for one final time to pass on what information I could about the state of affairs the Adeptus Astartes were leaving behind (a lot of dead heretics, mainly), and pick up the latest news of the Guard campaign in case, in defiance of my expectations, Gries turned out to be interested. (I was right, as it happened; he wasn't. As soon as we'd left the Viridia System, his attention was focussed entirely on the pursuit of the space hulk, and I can't recall him ever mentioning the campaign there again.)

To my relief, I didn't run across DuPanya anywhere in the corridors of the palace, as I was by no means certain how much he knew of my association with his daughter, or of her recent displeasure. As it happened, I never set eyes on him again. I did find Orten hanging around in the command centre, marginalised by the Guard officers but gamely determined to do whatever he could to prevent them from making too much of a mess of his home world, and made sure I said my farewells to him as publicly as possible: I don't know if that made anyone take him a little more seriously, but I hope so.<sup>43</sup>

Of Mira, I saw nothing before quitting the palace, which I must confess to being ambivalent about. On the one hand, I couldn't help feeling a certain sense of relief at having avoided a confrontation which would probably have ended in recrimination, but on the other, I've never liked leaving unfinished business behind. As Jurgen drove us out of the main courtyard and through the wreckage of the gardens along the main causeway, which stood out clearly as a straight strip of mud marginally less churned up than its surroundings, I found myself glancing back over the armour plate protecting the crew compartment of the Salamander he'd requisitioned from somewhere to scan the hundreds of windows in search of a flash of blonde hair; but in vain. At last, as we passed through the battered gate in the outer wall through which Trosque had launched his attack on the besiegers, the palace disappeared from sight, and I directed my attention to our immediate environment.

I hadn't seen much of Fidelis in the relatively short time which had

elapsed since our arrival. On the few occasions I'd ventured out to compare notes with Guard commanders or Space Marines in the field it had been aboard a Rhino which my hosts had thoughtfully dispatched, the arrival of which always seemed to excite a certain degree of interest among Guardsmen and PDF loyalists alike. It seemed the Reclaimers were still taking the matter of my personal safety as seriously as the Terminator sergeant had intimated, which was fine by me. The only downsides that I'd discovered so far were an inability to see anything beyond the interior of the APC, which was considerably roomier than the Chimeras I was familiar with, and the fact that the bench seats were to the same scale as the fittings aboard the Thunderhawk: fine for the superhuman stature of a Space Marine in powered armour, but distinctly uncomfortable for us ordinary mortals. The upshot of which was that I'd only seen snapshots of the city, as it were, generally a disputed part, where the amount of ambient noise and incoming fire made loitering to sightsee decidedly unwise.

Now, as Jurgen cannonballed us through the streets at his usual breakneck pace, swerving around those few obstacles too solid to bounce our tracks across, I found myself pleasantly surprised. The tide of war had evidently receded from the capital at last, only a few rockpools of unrest remaining to be dealt with, and the first signs of something approaching normality were beginning to appear, like shoots of green among the ashes of a forest fire. The road to the starport was clear of debris, the worst of the cratering marring its surface patched with raw rockcrete dressings, which I suppose was only to be expected given the amount of military traffic rumbling along it in both directions. What I hadn't anticipated was the number of civilian vehicles threaded in among them, overloaded cargo haulers for the most part, jammed with furnishings, possessions and grim-faced people clinging on for dear life among the detritus of their lives. They were, I suppose, returning to their homes, or the sites where once they stood, hoping to pick up where they'd left off, in defiance of all reason. Most of the ramshackle transports were graced with icons of the Emperor, and a few meagre offerings had been left at the shrines beside the road, where, no doubt, they'd be purloined as soon as dusk fell, in defiance of the curfew.<sup>44</sup>

The side streets, which Jurgen eventually took to, impatient with the restrictions the density of traffic on the main thoroughfare placed on his natural inclination to open the throttle to its maximum and leave it there, were more cluttered, of course, but even here there were signs of returning

life, which I found cheering. People were moving among the rubble of the sundered buildings, salvaging what they could, although if the emporium I'd encountered the sentries of the brood mind in was anything to go by, I doubted that the looters would have left them much.<sup>45</sup> In a few places the smoke of cooking fires rose from within the ruins, where enough of the original structures remained to keep the rain off, occasionally supplemented with tarpaulins or other makeshift materials.

Few of the people we passed spared us a glance, with the inevitable exception of the children, who were playing amid the ruins with the total absorption in the concerns of the moment peculiar to the very young. They tended to glance up as we hurtled by, stones and chunks of pulverised rockcrete scattering from our treads, shouting or waving, before returning to their games.

As yet, there seemed little in the way of organised rebuilding, although we caught occasional glimpses of what might have been the beginning of a coordinated effort at returning Fidelis to habitability. A handful of tech-priests seemed to be abroad, roaming the city in ones and twos, making earnest notes in their data-slates or poking about in conduits, while a party of sappers from one of the Vostroyan regiments was erecting flakboard huts in a park Jurgen couldn't be bothered to circumvent, presumably intended to house the hopeful occupants of the lorries we'd seen earlier. The only building under active repair that we passed was a local temple, where ragged refugees were laying bricks under the supervision of an elderly ecclesiarch, no doubt in exchange for the promise of food and a bed for the night.<sup>46</sup>

A few moments later our progress began to slow again, and I poked my head over the armour plate surrounding the passenger compartment, reaching for my laspistol by reflex as I did so. Normally I liked to have the Salamanders I requisitioned fitted with a pintel mount, so I'd have something a bit more lethal to hand if things went plain-shaped, but Jurgen had just had to take what he could find in the vehicle pool, leaving me to make do with my sidearm if push came to shove. A Caledonian sergeant, in a mottled camo-patterned uniform similar to the one Orten favoured, was flagging us down, the squad of troopers with him regarding us with the wary eyes of combat veterans. They were keeping their lasguns trained on us, just as they should have done with so much PDF kit still in the hands of insurrectionists and troublemakers, and I was pleased to see that they kept



them on aim even after my uniform had become visible.

‘Commissar.’ The sergeant nodded a greeting, no doubt wondering if he or any of his men were in trouble, but determined not to show it. Very few Guardsmen are pleased to see a red sash, which no doubt accounts for the inordinate number of my colleagues felled by friendly-fire accidents. ‘We weren’t told to expect you.’

‘Probably because I had no idea any of our people were down here,’ I said, noting the faint stirring of relief among the soldiers. ‘My aide and I are on our way to the aerodrome.’ I smiled at the troopers, who were still keeping us covered. ‘You can stand down. We’re not hybrids or ’stealer puppets.’

‘Of course not,’ the sergeant agreed, stepping forwards, a trifle nervously, with a portable auspex. ‘But if you wouldn’t mind indulging me, sir? I’m sure you wouldn’t want us to neglect our orders.’

‘By no means,’ I agreed, reholstering my laspistol and climbing down to the roadway so he could take his genescan a little more easily. The unit beeped, and a rune flashed green, after which everyone looked a little more comfortable, particularly once Jurgen was confirmed to be a reasonable approximation of a human as well. ‘You’re to be commended for your caution.’

That went down well, as I’d known it would. There are far better ways of managing troops than simply putting the fear of the Emperor into them, as I try to convince the young pups in my care these days, in the vague hope that their careers will last a bit longer than their first night patrol.

The sergeant nodded. ‘That’s the worst thing about fighting ’stealers,’ he agreed. ‘You never know who might turn out to be a hybrid or an implant. Squadmate of mine turned on us on Keffia, just like that, no warning, been with us since basic. Had to shoot him myself.’

‘I was there too,’ I said, not wanting to remember too much about it. ‘Similar thing happened. Bad business all round.’

The sergeant shrugged. ‘I never liked him, mind. And I got his stripe. For showing initiative. So it could have been worse.’

I smiled again. ‘You’re a born optimist, sergeant. The Guard needs men like you.’

‘Kind of you to say so, sir.’ And, Emperor help me, he actually blushed. ‘But you’ll have to go round, I’m afraid. The street’s impassable.’

‘We’ll get through,’ Jurgen said, with quiet confidence, taking the statement as a challenge, as I’d known he would.

The sergeant shook his head. 'I doubt it,' he said. Jurgen might have been about to argue the point, but subsided, at a look from me.

'Impassable how?' I asked, and the sergeant shrugged.

'It's not there,' he said simply. Well, that sounded distinctly peculiar, so I left the Salamander with its engine running, and walked off down the rubble-strewn carriageway. For the first hundred metres or so, nothing seemed to have changed, the ravaged cityscape looming over me, and my bootsoles scraping against the smaller chunks of debris littering the 'crete.

Then the road ended, as sharply and abruptly as if excised with a knife. For a few metres the road surface became rippled, like a hardened lava flow, then simply dropped away into a broad pit, some three or four metres deep. It may seem incredible, reading this now, but my first thought was simply how lucky we'd been to have run into the troopers when we did; if they hadn't flagged us down, we might well have discovered the hole by falling into it. Then, as I began to take in the way the edges of the buildings around me had also melted and flowed like candle wax, realisation belatedly hit. This was where Mira and I had fought our desperate battle beneath the ground, and come so close to extinction before the Thunderhawk had torn the roof off to allow the Terminators to come to our rescue.

I can't be sure how long I stood there, reliving the horror and marvelling at the precision of our saviours, before a familiar odour brought me back to myself.

'That's a big hole,' Jurgen commented, materialising at my shoulder, his lasgun held ready for use as always.

I nodded. 'It is indeed,' I agreed, picking out the tunnel the purestrains had emerged from at last. Nothing was left of the creatures which had attacked us, save a few greasy stains on the rain-streaked rockcrete below; some of the Terminators had carried flamers, and made sure that every last one had been consigned to the pyre before they broke off. I couldn't help wondering how many more of the xenos spawn still lurked beneath our feet though, or how many apparent innocents still carried their taint. But that wasn't my problem any longer, thanks to Gries and the libratory tech-priest Yaffel.

'It'll take some filling in,' Jurgen added, after a moment or two of further deliberation.

'I'm sure it will,' I said, turning away at last, before my imagination could start playing tricks with the echoes. 'Can you find your way round it?

We've still got a shuttle to catch.'

Jurgen nodded. 'Leave it to me,' he said.

Thanks to my aide's usual robust driving style, the unexpected detour didn't detain us overmuch: we reached the landing pad just as the Thunderhawk I'd arrived aboard, or its identical twin I'd noticed in the hangar bay, roared in over our heads and snuggled itself down between the blast walls like a raptor returning to its nest. Mine wasn't the only head turning to follow it: the scores of Guardsmen and Navy hands scurrying about the place were undoubtedly accustomed to the ceaseless arrival and departure of Valkyries, Aquilae and Throne alone knew how many other types of shuttle, drop-ship and combat craft, but the distinctive silhouette of the Adeptus Astartes vessel grabbed their attention at once.

Jurgen, fortunately, remained as phlegmatic as ever, apparently considering it nothing more than a ship like any other, and weaved his way through the distracted ground crews with his usual aplomb, missing cargo haulers and foot sloggers by a typically narrow margin. Fortunately, the noise of our engine and the idling Thunderhawk drowned out the comments which followed us, although the gestures which accompanied them were more than sufficient to convey their gist.

As he steered us through the slalom of blast walls surrounding the pad,<sup>47</sup> it became clear that Jurgen and I weren't the only guests of the Chapter intending to embark for the *Revenant* that afternoon. Magos Yaffel was there too, oscillating even more than usual in the backwash from the idling thrusters, accompanied by a handful of tech-adepts, and a couple of servitors, which were busily engaged in transferring an unfeasibly large collection of boxes and bundles aboard. As Jurgen coasted the Salamander to a halt and began collecting our kit together, I hopped down and nodded a cordial greeting to the cogboys.<sup>48</sup>

'Magos,' I said, raising my voice a little to be heard over the screaming engines, 'I wasn't aware that you'd be accompanying us.'

'The Omnissiah directs our footsteps along the path of knowledge,' Yaffel replied, cranking up the volume of his voxcaster to overcome the din. Refraining from pointing out that, in his case, that would be singularly difficult, I merely nodded as if the evident quotation<sup>49</sup> meant something to me. 'And the potential store of data to be reaped on this endeavour is incalculable.' At the time, I thought his words to be no more than a simple

figure of speech. If I'd known then what he was driving at, I'd have clambered back aboard the Salamander and told Jurgen to head for the horizon with all the speed he could squeeze from it (which I've no doubt would have been considerable). As it was, however, I merely exchanged a few more reflexive pleasantries, before following my overloaded aide to the bottom of the boarding ramp, and dodging out of the way of a servitor on its way back for another load of whatever Yaffel and his cronies considered essential on the voyage.

As I regained my balance, another vehicle drew up smoothly alongside our abandoned Salamander, and I felt a strange unease descend upon me. It was a groundcar, long and sleek, its armourcrys windows polarised to the same glossy black as the bodywork. For some reason I was put in mind of the blank, reflective faces of the metal killers I'd fled from on Interitus Prime, which I'd almost rather have faced again, if my sudden intuition about the car's passenger turned out to be right.

It was. A uniformed chauffeur, in a livery I'd come to know well since my arrival here, unfolded himself from the driver's compartment and glided round to the rear door. As he opened it, Mira emerged, the sudden change in her expression a clear indication that the vehicle was soundproofed as effectively as it was shielded from the vulgar gaze of the hoi polloi, and waved cheerfully in my direction.

I waved back, masking my relief at her evident good humour with a faint smile meant to convey pleased surprise, and she came trotting over, grinning like a puppy who's just discovered how to open the meat locker. She'd evidently got tired of playing soldiers, as she'd discarded the dress-up uniform in favour of something a little more feminine: an indigo blouse, low-cut, like pretty much everything else in her wardrobe, and a crimson knee-length skirt, which, like the blouse, was fashioned from some material that shimmered slightly as the light caught it. In the turbulence thrown up by the Thunderhawk's idling thrusters it rippled constantly, so that Mira seemed to be clothed by a nimbus of rainbows. Her footwear was surprisingly practical: calf-high boots made from the hide of some local animal, although I doubted that their original owner had been quite so fluorescently pink.

'Mira,' I said, exhaling a little more strongly than I intended as she enveloped me in a hug which would have cracked an ork's ribs. 'It was kind of you to come and see me off.'

‘I’m not.’ She grinned again, and with a definite sense of foreboding I belatedly registered the fact that the chauffeur was removing what looked like almost as much baggage as the tech-priests had accumulated from the car. ‘I’m coming too. Isn’t that a wonderful surprise?’

‘Wonderful doesn’t even begin to cover it,’ I said truthfully.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## NINE

Perhaps fortunately, the ear-splitting noise inside the Thunderhawk after it took off made further conversation impossible. There were the headsets Veren had drawn my attention to on the journey down, of course, but the last thing I needed was Mira vox-casting the details of our association across an open comm-net, so I made sure the one I gave her just prior to our departure was switched off before handing it over. Though grateful for the aural protection it offered, I declined to activate mine either: I had no interest in anything the tech-priests might have to say, and I knew from long experience that Jurgen would simply lapse into sullen silence the second our skids left the ground, too preoccupied with holding on to his last meal until we reached the turbulence-free zone beyond the atmosphere to respond to anything short of a life-threatening emergency. Or possibly an acute lack of tanna. In any event, he was hardly a sparkling conversationalist at the best of times, so I wasn't exactly left feeling deprived.

All of which left me with far too much time to brood. I'd had a few moments before we lifted to ask Mira what the frak she was doing here, although of course I was rather more circumspect about the manner in which I phrased the question, and she'd smiled in a manner I found distinctly disturbing. Before she could answer, though, the tech-priests had started trooping aboard, and Jurgen returned to inform me that our kit was properly stowed, so I'd had little option but to follow the herd and hope everything had a rational explanation. Mira certainly wasn't behaving in the

usual fashion of people bidding farewell to their home world, gazing at it through the viewports as long as they could, trying to burn the image of it into their memories in the near certainty of never seeing it again, preferring instead to smile at me in a manner uncomfortably reminiscent of a bored eldar reaver looking for someone to torture to death to pass the time. Perhaps she simply lacked the imagination to grasp what embarking on a voyage through the warp actually meant. Even if she did return home, the chances were that decades, or even a century or two, were likely to have passed, and that she'd be as much of a stranger to the altered Viridia as an offworlder setting eyes on it for the first time.<sup>50</sup>

Predictably, I didn't get another chance to broach the subject until after the Thunderhawk had docked with the *Revenant*, after a journey Jurgen had probably found mercifully brief. The strike cruiser was still orbiting Viridia at a relatively low altitude, barely beyond the point where the first faint wisps of upper atmosphere would begin to drag at her hull, no doubt to facilitate the use of her teleportarium, or allow her weapon batteries to strike at targets on the surface in the unlikely event of her Space Marine complement requiring a little additional assistance. It still seemed long enough to me, though, and it was with a great sense of relief that I heard our engines throttling back, and the series of metallic clangs which preceded our arrival. What Yaffel and his tech-priests found to amuse them, I have no idea. Perhaps they conversed amongst themselves in the peculiar manner of their kind, or just remained absorbed in communing with their data-slates.

I didn't have much opportunity to talk to Mira after we disembarked, either. To my pleased surprise, Drumon was standing at the bottom of the ramp, and exchanged a few words of greeting with me, before striding on to confer with the tech-priests and begin examining the equipment they'd brought with them. By the time I'd completed the pleasantries and looked round for Milady DuPanya, she'd already snared a couple of faintly stunned-looking Chapter serfs, who'd evidently been incautious enough to wander within hectoring range, and was holding forth to them in great detail about the correct disposal of her luggage. I decided to leave her to it, and went to separate Jurgen and Gladden, the factotum who'd been assigned to look after me on the voyage here, who were already squabbling over the matter of who should be responsible for my kit with belligerent tenacity and icy politeness respectively. Apparently no one had expected me to bring my own aide, let alone one who looked more like a Nurgle cultist than a

member of the Imperial Guard, so his arrival had caught them on the hop, rather.

By the time I'd sorted that one out, Drumon and the tech-priests had disappeared about whatever business they had together, and the pile of luggage Mira had brought with her had diminished to something approaching portable. I lingered while the last of it was thrown onto a trolley which looked as though it were more usually employed to rearm the Thunderhawks, and fell into step beside her. 'I give up,' I said lightly, contriving to look as though I was joking. 'What did you say you were doing here?'

'I'm the official representative of the Governor of Viridia,' she said, grinning impishly at me from under her fringe. 'My father's sent me to assess whether the space hulk remains any kind of threat to our system.'

'How can it?' I asked, no doubt looking and sounding as baffled as I felt. 'It's been gone for a century and a half, and it's hardly likely to come back.'

'But it could have left other threats behind, as well as the genestealers,' Mira said, in tones which made it abundantly clear that she didn't believe that any more than I did. 'We'd be failing in our duty to the Viridian populace if we didn't make every effort to ensure their safety, particularly now.'

'So your father asked you to come along on the hunt for the *Spawn*?' I enquired, trying to keep my scepticism from becoming audible in my voice.

Mira grinned again. 'I sort of volunteered,' she said cheerfully, taking hold of my arm.

I nodded, being able to reconstruct that conversation all too easily. This had all been her idea, clearly, although I still found it hard to credit that she'd become sufficiently infatuated during our brief affair to be willing to wave goodbye to everything she'd known just to follow me through the warp.<sup>51</sup> 'How very dutiful of you,' I responded. 'No doubt the populace will be suitably grateful.'

'No doubt,' Mira agreed, clearly not giving a flying one what the hoi polloi thought, and attaching herself to me with a tight grip. 'So it looks as though we'll be liaising together for the foreseeable future.'

Despite the faint sense of unease about the situation which continued to oppress me, particularly in the quieter moments when I had time to reflect on the potential ramifications, I had to admit that Mira's words in the



hangar bay had cheered me at least as much as they gave me cause for disquiet. As I've said before, she was pleasant enough company, and I'd felt rather starved of companionship during the voyage to Viridia once I'd recovered enough to start taking notice of my surroundings. This time round, although the circumstances were somewhat bizarre, I had someone I felt I could converse with, as well as engaging in a variety of recreational pursuits, all of which promised to make my second sojourn aboard the *Revenant* a great deal more congenial than the first had been.

Then, too, I had Jurgen with me again, which fact alone eased my mind considerably. We'd been through a lot together since our first chance meeting on Desolatia (and were to go through even more in the years to come, although, perhaps mercifully, I had little inkling of quite how much terror and bloodshed awaited me before I could sink into a relatively peaceful retirement<sup>52</sup>), and the prospect of facing whatever horrors awaited us aboard the *Spawn of Damnation* seemed far less daunting than they would have done without the knowledge that he would be watching my back as steadfastly as always. Not that I had any intention of getting within a thousand kilometres of the cursed piece of warp flotsam, of course, so anything lurking within the tangled mess of conjoined starships was of little interest to me; once we'd caught up with it, if we ever did, the shipmaster and his gunnery teams could carve it up at their leisure, and in the unlikely event of anything getting off before they did, it would have to be foolish in the extreme to try boarding a Space Marine vessel.

All in all, I suppose, I felt as happy about the fool's errand we were on as it was possible to under the circumstances, and resolved to make the best of things – an endeavour which Mira seemed determined to help with.

'I'm still not sure how you managed to persuade Gries to let you aboard in the first place,' I said, over a surprisingly palatable meal in my quarters, a few hours after we'd boarded. A fair proportion of her mountain of luggage turned out to have been delicacies of one sort or another, no doubt with my comments about the Spartan fare I'd subsisted on during our voyage to Viridia fresh in her mind. It felt odd to be eating a second breakfast when my body clock insisted it was late evening, but I'd hopped between enough worlds by now to be confident that I'd have readjusted to the *Revenant's* idea of chronology before too much longer. Gladden had got used to bringing my meals in to me here on the previous voyage, and resumed the arrangement without being asked; no doubt the serfs would have been as

uncomfortable to see Mira and I in their mess hall as we would have felt about being there. What the Reclaimers did about meals, I had no idea, but if they ate together at all I was certain they'd find catering to the tastes and needs of ordinary mortals something of a trial. At any event, neither Mira nor myself were ever invited to join them, which I'm sure we found as much of a relief as our hosts did.<sup>53</sup>

Mira shrugged and bit into the florn cake she'd just spread with ackenberry preserve. 'You know how it is,' she began, a trifle indistinctly, before swallowing and continuing more clearly. 'You can get people to do pretty much anything, if you put your mind to it. You just need to know how to ask.'

Which didn't really answer my question, of course, and being an old hand at verbal evasion myself, I persisted, even as I admired her technique. After a few more moments of verbal sparring, which I have to confess I rather enjoyed, I eventually backed her into having to give a straight answer.

'It was easy enough,' she admitted, licking a few stray traces of the sticky preserve from her fingers with a coquettish glance in my direction, to see if I'd be distracted by that old trick. (Which, I'm bound to say, I might have been if I didn't already know her as well as I did, so I just kept looking at her with an expression of polite enquiry until she gave it up as a bad job and carried on.) 'I simply told him it was my duty as a member of the ruling house to confirm that Viridia was safe, just as it was his after having pledged his aid to our people to make sure that the job was complete.'

'I see,' I said, contriving to look unimpressed, although if I'd still been wearing my cap at the time I'd have taken it off to her. Basically, she'd just told a captain of the Adeptus Astartes that charging off on a private quest before making sure that every single 'stealer, hybrid and implant on Viridia had been tracked down and eradicated<sup>54</sup> would be a gross dereliction of his duty, but he could do what he liked without impugning the honour of his Chapter if he took her along too, as that would make it an extension of his original assignment. Had it not been for her complete self-absorption, she would have been an extraordinary asset to Imperial diplomacy.

'How long do you think it'll be before we catch up with the *Spawn*?' Mira asked, after her final recon sweep among the empty platters littering the tray had failed to turn up any further comestibles.

I shrugged. 'Hard to say,' I said, which sounded a little more authoritative

than ‘frakked if I know,’ which was actually the truth of the matter. ‘I suppose it depends on how good the Navigator is at reading the warp currents, and whether Yaffel has got his calculations right. Even if everything goes perfectly, which it never does, we’ll probably be following the damned thing for months – if we ever catch up with it at all.’

‘Sounds like we’re in for rather a dull time, then,’ Mira concluded.

‘Yes, I’m afraid so,’ I agreed, little guessing how far off the mark that was going to turn out to be, and just as well too for my peace of mind. ‘We’ll just have to amuse ourselves as best we can.’

‘I’m sure we can think of something,’ she said, before yawning spectacularly and stretching in a manner which emphasised her natural undulations in a decidedly pleasing fashion.

‘Looks like you’re ready for bed,’ I said, chiming for Jurgen to come in and clear the debris of our meal. It seemed he and Gladden had reached the sort of compromise that only occurs or matters to underlings jealous of their status in colliding hierarchies, and that henceforth refreshments and their subsequent remains were to be handed from one to the other in the corridor leading to the guest quarters – which seemed like a pointless duplication of effort to me, but if it kept my aide happy, then good luck to him.

Mira grinned at me, the familiar mischievous expression on her face. ‘I thought you’d never ask,’ she said.

In the end, we weren’t left to speculate about our mission for very long. After a few hours’ sleep, which left me sufficiently refreshed to resume my duties, and left Mira somewhat cranky to say the least, Jurgen’s distinctive aroma oozed into my quarters again, accompanied by the more fragrant one of freshly brewed tanna. ‘Captain Gries presents his compliments, sir, and would like to see you on the bridge at your earliest convenience,’ he informed me, busying himself with the tanna pot and a pair of tea bowls.

‘What about me?’ Mira asked, following him in from the direction of her own stateroom, still looking somewhat the worse for wear despite a change of clothes and a spraybath. It seemed she found the beds the Reclaimers provided for their guests a little too firm for comfort, although I found mine considerably more conducive to sleep than the overstuffed mattresses of the palace in Fidelis had been.

Jurgen nodded. ‘I brought an extra bowl in, miss, in case you fancied one too.’

‘Just get me a recaf,’ she snapped. ‘And that’s not what I meant.’

The intransigent expression I knew only too well began to settle across my aide’s grimy features, and I stepped in hastily to head off the inevitable clash. ‘If you wouldn’t mind, Jurgen,’ I added.

‘Of course not, commissar,’ he said, his equanimity at least partially restored by the belated courtesy, albeit one that had arrived by proxy. The look he gave Mira’s oblivious back as he left, however, made it abundantly clear that the slight wouldn’t be forgotten easily or soon. ‘And I’ve no messages concerning the young lady.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, as he disappeared down the corridor, the door hissing closed behind him. I picked up the drink he’d prepared and sipped it gratefully, regarding Mira gravely through the steam. ‘Please don’t treat Jurgen like one of your household servants,’ I said, as soon as I was sure he was out of earshot. ‘He’s an Imperial Guardsman, and the aide of a commissar, with an exemplary record of courage in the face of the enemy. He deserves a bit of respect.’

Mira stared at me, her jaw working for a moment like a ruminating bovine, and the sullen expression I hadn’t seen since the day of our first meeting smeared itself across her face. Then, as abruptly as the mist burning off from an early-morning hab spire, it had gone, displaced by another jaw-cracking yawn.

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘Sorry. Not enough sleep.’ Then the gamine grin was back. ‘It was worth it, though.’

Perhaps fortunately, I was spared having to find a reply to that by the return of Jurgen, who ushered the tray-bearing form of Gladden through the door, with an airy wave in Mira’s direction. The odour of recaf began to mingle with the others in the room, which was beginning to seem decidedly cramped by now, despite the high ceiling. ‘She’s in there,’ he said perfunctorily, then returned his attention to me. ‘I found Gladden outside, sir, looking for the young lady, so I took the liberty of directing him in here. Seeing as she seemed in so much of a hurry.’

‘Thank you, Jurgen,’ Mira said, with a smile which surprised me almost as much as it evidently did my aide. ‘That was very thoughtful of you. Especially as I’d been so unforgivably rude. I’m afraid I’m not at my best when I’ve just woken up.’

‘That’s all right, miss,’ Jurgen said, fully mollified by the unexpected apology. ‘You should see the commissar first thing in the morning.’

‘Quite,’ I said, while Mira turned away from him, suppressing a fit of the giggles with manifest difficulty. ‘Was there anything else, Jorgen?’

‘Not for the moment, sir,’ my aide said, retreating from the room with an unmistakably self-satisfied air, while Mira fell on the recaf like a kroot on fresh meat.

Gladden coughed delicately. ‘The brother-captain extends greetings to the Viridian envoy in the name of the Reclaimers, and suggests you may find a visit to the bridge informative, madam.’

‘Then in the name of the Viridian Hegemony, I reciprocate his salutations, and will attend upon him with all due dispatch,’ Mira responded, with a remarkably straight face.

‘I’ll be along too, as soon I’ve finished my tea,’ I said, refilling the tanna bowl.

Gladden looked mildly disconcerted for a moment, but recovered quickly. ‘Then I’ll convey the news of your imminent arrivals,’ he said, and left the room as quickly as he could without appearing to hurry.

Mira turned an accusing eye on me. ‘Ciaphas, that was mean,’ she said, not quite succeeding in hiding her amusement. ‘He was only doing his job.’ She lifted the lid from a side plate, next to her recaf, and studied the lumps of reconstituted protein thus revealed with a faintly suspicious frown, before stuffing one into her mouth with a resigned shrug.

‘I suppose you’re right,’ I said, feeling as though I’d been somehow caught out by her. ‘But I’ve never been comfortable with all that flowery protocol stuff.’ I’d been getting a lot more used to it since being attached to brigade headquarters, of course, which had meant attending more tedious diplomatic functions than I’d ever thought possible back in my early days with the 12th Field Artillery, but I much preferred people to either say what they meant, or lie to me in plain, simple language. Still do, if I’m honest, although I suppose it was good practice for much later on in my career, when I found myself attached to the lord general’s staff, and having to hack my way through thickets of polite obfuscatory verbiage on an almost daily basis. Luckily, by that time, my fraudulent reputation was so widespread I was able to sidestep the game entirely, playing up to my image of the bluff man of action, so I never had to learn to talk like that. Which was probably just as well, or my brain would have had to shut down in sheer self defence.

Mira shrugged, failing to offer me any of the nutritionally balanced whatever-it-was she was throwing down her neck, and washed the final

lump away with a chug of recaf. ‘How do you think I feel?’ she asked rhetorically. ‘I grew up thinking that sort of soil improver was plain Gothic.’

‘Then I’m amazed you turned out as well adjusted as you did,’ I said, wondering for a moment just how sarcastic I was being, but Mira appeared to take the remark at face value.

‘It’s not been easy,’ she remarked complacently, and brushed a few crumbs from her inevitably exposed cleavage. ‘Do you think this is a little louche for visiting the bridge?’

I examined the day gown she’d donned with a critical eye. It was cut from some shimmering gold fabric, which seemed to be held up by nothing more than willpower, and moulded itself snugly around whatever it touched.<sup>55</sup> The effect was certainly striking, particularly if the one you were after was that of a highly priced courtesan, but hardly suited to a military environment. I was sure the Astartes and the Mechanicus drones wouldn’t be distracted at all, if they even noticed it, but the ship and its defences were in the hands of flesh-and-blood mortals, who might find their attention wandering at a critical moment, so pleasant as the view was in the abstract...

‘Possibly,’ I temporised. ‘Perhaps something a little more businesslike would be better.’

‘Why, Ciaphas Cain.’ Mira grinned at me again, with a coquettish tilt to her head, which made her look more like a fifty-credit joygirl than ever. ‘I do believe you’re jealous.’ Then, before I could gather my wits to do anything more than gape in astonishment, she undulated out of the room.



## TEN

By the time Mira returned, rather more suitably attired in what she told me was one of her hunting outfits, I'd managed to convince myself that she'd been joking. After all, the very idea of me being resentful of other men appreciating her physical attributes was ludicrous enough to begin with, let alone the fact that most of the potential rivals for her affections aboard the *Revenant* would either have been tech-priests or Space Marines, and therefore out of the running. Which left only the serfs, who I doubted she'd even consider in that regard, given her typically aristocratic tendency to view the lower orders as little more than a refined type of servitor which didn't dribble lubricants on the carpet, and Jorgen, who was hardly the stuff a maiden's dreams were made of, unless she'd eaten too much cheese before turning in.

'Very suitable,' I complimented her, having had no idea until now that her wardrobe contained anything even remotely practical. It had definitely risen to the occasion this time though, providing a jacket and trousers in muted colours, and a stout pair of boots, all of which lent her an air of businesslike efficiency, without overstating the effect. Fortunately, she appeared to have left the fowling piece that went with it at home.

Mira pulled a face. 'It's all a bit dowdy, if you ask me,' she said, examining the effect critically in a nearby mirror. 'Perhaps I should try again.'

'We're expected on the bridge,' I said, mindful of the length of time she'd already wasted rummaging through her luggage, and leaned in to straighten

my cap in the looking glass she'd appropriated. Jurgen handed me my weapon belt. 'We can't keep our hosts waiting any longer,' I went on, checking the power levels in the laspistol and the chainsword's motivator cells, before fastening it into place. 'It wouldn't be polite or diplomatic.'

'Says the man who thinks "tact" means "nailed down",' Mira said, following me out into the corridor. At least she wasn't arguing about it, though, which I suppose was something.

'I'm a soldier,' I said, taking refuge behind my public persona. Something was getting to her, that much was obvious, but I couldn't for the life of me see what it was. 'That means I take my duties seriously.' Whenever there was a good chance that someone was watching me, anyway.

'You can be really pompous sometimes, do you know that?' Mira asked, in the tone of voice women use when they neither want nor expect an answer, and strode off ahead of me looking sulkier than ever.

I remembered enough of the layout of the *Revenant* to find my way to the bridge without difficulty, and fortunately, by the time we got there, either Mira's mood had improved, or she was practising her diplomatic skills again. As I'd expected, the warren of corridors had proven sufficiently daunting for her to have rejoined me without a word a few moments after her inexplicable burst of bad temper, and she seemed to be on her best behaviour as soon as we were in the presence of our hosts once more.

'Commissar. You are prompt, as always,' Gries greeted me, politely and inaccurately as we entered the bridge, and Drumon looked up from a huddle of tech-priests he was conferring with next to the hololith just long enough to nod a greeting in my direction. Mira gave me a sharp look, as though I'd somehow contrived to upstage her on purpose. 'Milady DuPanya. Your presence is appreciated.'

'But not that much, apparently,' she muttered *sotto voce*, apparently forgetting the preternaturally keen senses with which the Emperor had seen fit to endow his chosen warriors. If either of the Space Marines present overheard her, however, they were too polite, or indifferent, to respond.

'Are the last of your combat teams aboard yet?' I asked, keen to show that I was taking an interest, and Gries nodded.

'They are,' he assured me. 'Squad Trosque completed the cleansing of the forge complex on Asteroid 459 while you were sleeping, and their Thunderhawk docked a few moments ago. Nothing remains to be done beyond the mopping up of a few isolated remnants of the infection and the



restoration of good governance, both tasks for which the Imperial Guard seem admirably suited.'

'I concur,' I said, although being far more familiar with the way the Guard worked than he was, I felt rather less sanguine than the Reclaimers' captain about how easy the job would turn out to be.<sup>56</sup>

'Then it appears my people owe yours a considerable debt of gratitude,' Mira said, with a formal tilt of the head to the towering Space Marine, who turned his own to look at her as though one of the chairs had just spoken.

'Our service to the Emperor is reward enough,' he said, 'although your consideration is appreciated.'

'I'm pleased to hear it,' Mira replied dryly.

'Are we under way, then?' I asked, feeling faintly foolish at having to ask. The barely perceptible thrumming of the *Revenant's* engines had become so familiar to me in the course of our voyage to Viridia that I hadn't noticed it since boarding, although it was certainly there, a comforting presence in the background. They would have been idling while it was in orbit, of course, ticking over just sufficiently to provide power to feed the innumerable machine-spirits on whose health the vessel depended, and I listened hard, trying to determine if the note had deepened at all; but if it had, I wasn't able to tell the difference.

'We are,' the shipmaster informed me from his control throne.

I was a little surprised, but apparently questions regarding the functioning of the ship were delegated to him automatically by his masters, which was no bad thing; I'd hate to be aboard a vessel in combat whose captain had to refer every tactical decision to a higher authority. 'We'll be entering the warp at the designated material coordinates in approximately seven hours.'

'Six hours, fifty-four minutes and twelve point three one four seconds,' Magos Yaffel put in sharply from his position by the hololith. 'As I've explained, timing is absolutely crucial if we're to enter the warp currents in this particular region of space and time in precisely the right configuration to catch the fastest-flowing portion of the stream.'

'We'll catch it, magos,' the shipmaster assured him, 'Omniassiah willing.' Then, to my surprise, he made the sign of the cogwheel, which the tech-priests and Space Marines present all echoed.

'Forgive my ignorance,' I said, approaching the hololith, 'but if we're merely going to be following the same current as the space hulk, how can we hope to catch up with it? Won't we be travelling at the same rate?'

‘A very astute question,’ Yaffel said, in the manner of a born didact pouncing on the opportunity to expound on his favourite subject. ‘But the situation isn’t as hopeless as you might suppose. Don’t forget that the *Spawn of Damnation* is drifting, while the *Revenant* is moving under power. That means we can correct our attitude and orientation to the current, to optimise the flow around our Geller field.’

‘And in simple language for the rest of us?’ Mira muttered, then had the grace to blush as Drumon answered the comment she’d clearly believed to be inaudible.

‘I gather the sport of waveboarding<sup>57</sup> is popular in some of the coastal regions of your world?’ he asked, and Mira nodded, although Emperor alone knows how he discovered this. ‘Then think of us as riding a waveboard, while the hulk just bobs about as the Emperor sees fit. Does that make things clearer?’

‘I suppose so,’ Mira said, as politely as she could. ‘Thanks.’

‘In addition,’ Yaffel said, trying not to sound miffed at the interruption, ‘the *Spawn of Damnation* will be returning to the materium at random intervals, for indeterminate periods of time, some of which will be in the order of years. We, on the other hand, can enter and leave the warp at will. As soon as we determine that it’s not at a given exit point, we can re-enter the immaterium and continue our pursuit.’

‘I see,’ I said, vaguely surprised to find that I did. ‘But how can we be sure we’ve found an exit point in the first place?’

The moment I’d finished speaking, I knew I was going to regret asking that particular question: Yaffel’s gyrations increased markedly, as if he could barely contain his excitement, and he raised a hand to point at the hololith. Apparently divining what I’d just done, Mira kicked me sharply in the ankle, although I suspect my Guard-issue footwear made the gesture more uncomfortable for her than it did for me.

Fortunately, Drumon came to our rescue, intervening just before the magos could launch into the tirade of technotheological jargon I’d unwittingly come so close to unleashing. ‘Essentially,’ he said, ‘the passage of so large an object between the two realms leaves a weak spot in the boundary between them, which our Librarian and Navigator believe they can detect.’

‘How weak?’ Mira asked, no doubt mindful that just such a spot now existed within her home system, and probably picturing a host of daemons flooding through it to lay waste to Viridia.

Yaffel nodded reassuringly at her, no doubt having had to assuage the fears of sufficient numbers of lay listeners by now to be aware of what she must be thinking, and grabbing the chance to display his expertise after all. 'Not enough to allow any of the warp's denizens access to the materium,' he said, his flat monotone sounding oddly sure of itself. 'The weakness is more akin to a deformation of the interface than a breach of it.'

'I see,' Mira said, managing to sound as if she meant it. 'But if you can predict where the weaknesses are, can't you just tell which systems are at risk and warn them by astropath before the hulk gets there?'

'Things are less simple than that,' Drumon said, drawing our attention to the hololith again. A moment's perusal was enough for me to recognise an astronomical display of the sector, and a few of the systems surrounding it. 'Here is Viridia.' The system flared green. 'And these are the boundaries within which the *Spawn of Damnation* could have travelled.' A translucent tube began to extend itself from the green dot, the mouth of it widening the further it extended, so that by the time it reached its fullest extent, well over two dozen systems had been swallowed by the flickering funnel.

'It would take a lifetime to search all those systems,' I said, obscurely relieved at the realisation of just how impossible a task we were taking on. After a few months I'd find an excuse to leave them to it, and return to my desk, secure in the knowledge that whatever foolhardy undertaking General Lokris had been planning to drop me into the middle of would be safely over.

'Fortunately, we won't have to,' Yaffel told us, looking smugger by the second. 'Each emergence point we find will reduce the potential volume of space in which our quarry could be, and refine our predictions. After the first few have been plotted, we should be closing in on it nicely.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' I said.

'If they can find any weak spots in the first place,' Mira muttered beside me.

'How can we know until we try?' Drumon said, leaving everyone else looking faintly baffled.

After that, the briefing was clearly over to all intents and purposes, although I made sure I asked a few supplementary questions to show a proper concern for what we might be getting into. By this point Mira had given up even pretending to be interested, simply standing as close to me as she could in a grim silence I began to find increasingly oppressive.

As we eventually left, to let the shipmaster and his crew get on with whatever it is that starship bridge officers do, I felt it politic to pause for a moment in passing and pay our respects to Gries. To my surprise, he acknowledged my salute and nodded to me. 'I trust you have everything you require, commissar?'

Ignoring Mira's smug expression, I nodded. 'Your hospitality is as generous as I remembered,' I told him truthfully. 'But I was wondering, if it's no imposition, whether you had a little free space somewhere I could run through my combat drills every day. I rather neglected them while I was convalescing, and I almost paid the price for that in the 'stealer nest.' Shaken a little by the narrowness of our escape, I'd resumed my regular practice sessions with the chainblade forthwith, and I had no desire to forego them again if I could avoid it, although my quarters were rather too cramped for much in the way of physical exercise which didn't involve Mira.

'Of course.' Gries looked at me approvingly and nodded. 'I would expect nothing less from a warrior of your renown. I'll see to it that you're given access to one of our training chapels.'

'Thank you,' I said, only too aware of the magnitude of the accolade he'd so unexpectedly bestowed on me. All I'd been expecting was a corner of a cargo bay somewhere; this was tantamount to a senior ecclesiarch throwing open the door to the sepulchre of a saint and asking how many bones I'd like to take home.<sup>58</sup> 'I'll try to prove worthy of the honour.'

The Reclaimers captain was as good as his word. We'd barely made the transition to the warp when Jurgen knocked on my door with the news that the tertiary training chapel had been put at my disposal for an hour a day. I've no idea what the other two were like, but this one turned out to be an airy chamber about the size of a scrumball pitch, floored with metal mesh, and with luminators in the ceiling which could be adjusted to replicate any light level, from the glimmering of stars on a moonless world to a dazzling glare. Much of the equipment ranged about the walls was either unfamiliar to me, or intended for users a great deal larger and stronger than I was, so I left it alone, preferring to run through the complex patterns of attack and defence with the chainsword which years of familiarity had made instinctive beyond conscious thought.

It's probably no exaggeration to say that those hours of solitary sword

drills aboard the *Revenant* were among the happiest of my life. Throne alone knows I'm no Emperor-botherer, but centuries of use by His finest warriors had imbued the very walls of the place with a sense of dedication and reverence for tradition which made me feel as if everything I did there was part of something greater than myself. Not a sensation I'm used to, or particularly comfortable with in the normal course of events, but I couldn't deny it at the time.

If I'm honest, I also found the periods of solitude I spent there becoming an increasingly welcome respite from Mira's company. Which isn't to say that her companionship had become wearisome, exactly, but with very little to do herself, she seemed to want to spend every minute I wasn't attending to my duties attached to me like a Catathan faceeater. For a man as used to his own society as I was, that was a very mixed blessing indeed: so much so that, from time to time, I found myself inventing errands in order to delay my return to my quarters. On one occasion I even went so far as to ask Magos Yaffel for some further details of the techniques he was using to track the space hulk through the immaterium, which I dutifully transcribed into the report I knew full well General Lokris wasn't going to bother to read anyway when I eventually completed it, despite not having understood more than one word in twenty.

We all experienced a brief flurry of excitement about ten days into our voyage, when Gries announced that the Reclaimers' Librarian had sensed the deformation of the membrane between the warp and the material universe which Yaffel had predicted, but when the *Revenant* popped back into the real galaxy for a quick look round, we turned out to be drifting through the silent void between the stars, with nothing on the auspex for light years in any direction except for the occasional gas cloud. Nevertheless, the Reclaimers and the tech-priests were all greatly heartened by this confirmation that the theory was sound, and since no one had seriously expected to bag the infernal relic on the first try anyway, we resumed our progress at once with high morale all round; except for Mira, who told me in no uncertain terms that she was bored stiff, and that this was all somehow my fault for persuading her to come along on this absurd junket in the first place. I can't deny, though, that when she finally calmed down enough to apologise, her idea of making things up to me was definitely worth it.

Our second emergence in the wake of the *Spawn* found us in a stellar

system, which meant several days of frantic activity as we analysed auspex returns and sent the Thunderhawks scurrying around to check out anything which looked promising, but in the end we drew a complete blank. Fortunately, by luck or the grace of the Emperor, the star at its centre was a sullen, shrunken dwarf, husbanding the post-nova embers of a blaze which would have consumed anything in its habitable zone aeons before, and was now orbited by nothing more than barren chunks of scorched rock, which meant that the 'stealers would have found nothing or no one here to contaminate. So with a quick prayer of thanks to the Golden Throne, we were off again, casting ourselves adrift on the currents of the warp once more.

It must have been a day or so after we resumed our journey that I arrived in the training chapel at the appointed time to find it already occupied. I'd barely taken a couple of steps inside when I noticed Drumon in the middle of the chamber, surrounded by whirling cyberskulls, which he was fending off with the sword I'd noticed him wearing in the bunker under the palace in Fidelis, his plasma pistol gripped in his other hand. The blade was surrounded by a nimbus of crackling energy, like the claws I'd seen the Terminators use to tear apart the insurrectionist artillery pieces, although he must have moderated its strength in some way, as the tiny airborne servitors simply bounced away from each strike as though dazed by the impact rather than being sheared asunder. In a similar fashion, his plasma pistol had evidently been modified to unleash the merest fraction of its charge, as instead of being vaporised, each of the bobbing skulls he shot was only thrown aside for a moment, before returning to the attack.

The speed and precision of his movements were astonishing. I'm a pretty fair duellist myself,<sup>59</sup> but I'd never seen anything to match the flurry of stroke and guard the Techmarine was displaying. Not only that, he was somehow able to employ his sidearm with undiminished accuracy too, and even divert a little of his attention to swat at any cyberskulls trying to attack him from behind with the servo-arm grafted to the back of his armour, which he employed with the same casual expertise Felicia had displayed with her similarly sited mechadendrite back on Perlia.

Much as I'd have liked to linger and enjoy the spectacle, I began to edge away towards the door by which I'd entered. It seemed to me that Drumon had a far stronger claim on the training chapel than I did, since the demands of his duties must of necessity supersede the convenience of his Chapter's

guests, and that by my very presence I was intruding on something private and personal. (By this point, although I still felt I had little in common with the superhuman Adeptus Astartes, I'd got to know a few slightly better as a result of the honour their captain had seen fit to bestow on me, and I'd gathered that there was little a Space Marine regarded as more important than honing his combat skills.) I must have betrayed my presence in some way, however, because Drumon broke off his exercise to look in my direction, while the darting cyberskulls stopped moving, other than to correct their positions slightly in the air currents issuing from the recirculators.

'Commissar. My apologies.' He inclined his head, and made safe his weapons, before sheathing his sword and holstering his pistol. 'I recently made some adjustments to my wargear and wished to assess their performance. I regret the trials have taken far longer than I believed they would.'

'Time flies when you're having fun,' I said, intending to reassure him that no offence had been caused, then found myself wondering if I'd sounded too flippant; after all, it was almost tantamount to joking about the sacraments with an ecclesiarch. To my relief, though, Drumon smiled.

'It does indeed,' he agreed, dismissing the cyberskulls with a gesture: they hummed away to one corner of the room, like ossiferous grox-flies, and the Techmarine followed them, pausing in front of one of the control lecterns whose purpose I'd been unable to guess at before now. 'Would you like me to leave the sparring drones active?' he asked, one gauntleted hand poised above the runes of the display.

'I think they'd be too much for me,' I told him honestly, remembering the rapidity and precision with which the Reclaimer had moved, unencumbered by the bulky armour he wore.

Drumon looked down at me, his head tilted quizzically to one side. 'You can vary the speed and number of the attacks from this lectern,' he explained, demonstrating the procedure, his fingers moving deftly around the dials despite their thickness and the ceramite gauntlets in which they were encased. 'Use these controls to activate and deactivate the system. If you wish to avail yourself of it another day, I can teach you the correct incantations of awakening.'

'Thank you,' I said. It was a tempting offer. Much as I'd enjoyed the last few weeks of what my old schola duelling instructor Myamoto de Bergerac

always referred to as shadow practice, it wasn't the same as working with an opponent, and although it wasn't quite the same thing, the sparring drones would make an acceptable substitute. 'Are you sure my laspistol wouldn't damage them, though?'

'A good point,' Drumon said. 'I will obtain a practice powercell to fit it and reduce the power of your shots to within the limits of the drones' structural integrity.' So that was how they'd been able to keep bouncing back from hit after hit that should have pulverised them. 'In the meantime...' He powered down the system, and the cyberskulls settled onto their storage shelf like roosting birds.

'I'll look forward to trying them out,' I said. 'Running through the drills is all very well, but there's nothing quite like sparring with a partner to maintain your edge.'

'Indeed not,' Drumon agreed, and looked at me speculatively. 'I have a little time before I need to resume my duties. If you consider me a suitable match, I would be honoured to assist a guest of our Chapter to hone their skills.'

'More than suitable,' I said, wondering if I'd live long enough to regret accepting the offer. But I could hardly refuse without insulting him, and, by extension, the rest of my hosts. Not for the first time I wondered why I'd ever been persuaded to leave the 12th Field Artillery, where life had been relatively straightforward, but my snowballing reputation had finally attracted the attention of people of influence, and that had been that. If I'm honest, I'd thought a long and tedious career behind a desk, and a long way from anything lethal, had awaited me at brigade headquarters. The reality of being an independent commissar with a reputation for reckless heroism, and therefore a magnet for every hazardous assignment which came along, had been rather an unpleasant surprise.

'I suggest blades only to begin with,' Drumon said, drawing his and pressing the activation rune. The powerfield around it crackled into life, and a flicker of dubiety must have appeared on my face, as he added, 'the intensity of the field has been reduced to non-lethal levels.'

I smiled, with every appearance of being at ease. 'Non-lethal for an Astartes, or for a mere mortal like me?' I asked.

'Both, I assume,' Drumon replied, returning the smile. 'It should feel no more uncomfortable than a glancing blow from a shock maul.' Which, on its own, would be enough to return me to Sholer's domain if he wasn't



careful, so he wasn't being quite as reassuring as he evidently thought he was. It was too late to back out now, though, so I drew my own weapon and started the teeth rotating.

'I'm afraid I can't return the favour with this one,' I said. 'If it hits, it hits.'

Drumon took up a guard position, which seemed familiar enough, and beckoned me on. 'If you can strike through my armour,' he pointed out reasonably, 'I deserve a few nicks.'

We began cautiously, feeling out each other's style and favoured strategies, but as we began to get the measure of one another the rhythm of our strikes and parries began to increase in tempo. I was conscious that he was holding back, giving me a chance, and although I continued to work at it, I didn't put everything I had into the combat either, content to pace myself instead of burning off all my energy in a single burst of do-or-die endeavour. He was blindingly fast, of course, as I'd already seen, but I trusted my reflexes rather than trying to think too hard about what I was doing. In my experience of close-quarter fighting, which is far greater than I'm comfortable with, it's usually better to wait for your opponent to make a mistake than it is to go charging in and suddenly find yourself on your hands and knees looking for your head. On the whole, it seemed to be paying off: I took a couple of jolts from his sword's power field, but held on to my own, and seeing a sudden opening drove in at Drumon's chest. The teeth of my blade had just started to skitter off his torso armour when his own reflexes cut in, and he parried my attack with a speed and precision which left me breathless.

'Very good,' the Techmarine said, with more animation than I'd ever seen from him (or any of the others for that matter). 'First blood to you, commissar.'

'I hope I haven't damaged your armour,' I said, knowing how precious it would be to him, but Drumon shook his head.

'I will leave that mark as a reminder,' he said, 'never to underestimate an opponent.'

'I'm full of nasty, underhanded tricks,' I said, truthfully enough, but inflecting it like a joke.

Drumon nodded. 'In my experience, survival is honour enough for the battlefield. Would you care to continue?'

Well, I would, and we did, although I never got through his guard again; even though he still held back, he was always more than a match for me. By

the time we'd finished we found ourselves agreeing to meet again the next time his duties permitted, and over the next few weeks we managed to train together several times. I've no idea what his fellow Space Marines made of our arrangement,<sup>60</sup> but many of them seemed to be making more of an effort to be friendly around the time Drumon and I started training together.

All in all, the growing undercurrent of tension between Mira and I notwithstanding, I was beginning to slip into a fairly comfortable routine aboard the *Revenant*; so much so that I began to take it for granted that the voyage would continue uneventfully until we either caught up with our quarry, or abandoned the search. But, of course, I was about to receive a salutary reminder of just how dangerous our quest was, and that the galaxy contained far more perils than the one we pursued so diligently.



## ELEVEN

Our third attempt to locate the hulk in the material universe was almost the death of us all; not that we had any premonition of the fact as we prepared to make our latest transition back into the realm of the real. If anything, I suppose, by now we were growing a little complacent, confident that Yaffel's calculations could be relied on, and that the Librarian's abnatural talents would be sufficient to drop us into the materium more or less on top of the space hulk we sought – or, more likely, where it had been at some time in the past.

Accordingly, when Gries invited me to the bridge to observe the transition, my immediate expectation was of a repeat of our previous attempts: merely a wilderness of the void, the details probably a little different from those we'd investigated before, but essentially no more than another dead end to be discounted before moving on. Mira had been invited too, of course, as protocol demanded. But, no doubt to everyone's relief, she'd declined to drag herself out of bed, the summons having arrived in what she and the ship's chronographs insisted was the middle of the night.

I, of course, was enough of a seasoned campaigner to have hauled myself upright, yanked my laspistol out from under the pillow (provoking a tirade of most unladylike language in the process) and clambered into my uniform within moments of the message being delivered by a bleary-eyed Jurgen. Fortified by the mug of tanna he'd waved in my general direction as I made my exit, I arrived on the bridge a mere couple of minutes after the surge of nausea which generally accompanied the transition from the warp to the

realm of reality had swept over me.

‘Any luck?’ I asked, and the crewman manning the sensorium display nodded in my direction.

‘The system’s teeming with life. If the ’stealers are here, or have been, there’s a lot for them to infect.’

‘What kind of life?’ I asked. It couldn’t have been an Imperial system we’d arrived in, or our vox receivers would have been flooded with comms traffic, and challenges from the local SDF, by now. ‘Where in the Throne’s name are we?’

‘Processing the starfield data now,’ Yaffel assured me calmly, gazing into the hololith. ‘After correcting for parallax errors, our most probable location would be here, give or take approximately eight light-seconds.’ One of the stellar systems inside the green funnel, which had been reduced substantially since the first time I’d seen it, flared more brightly, and the translucent cone obligingly shrank a little more.

‘Anything on auspex?’ I asked, and the operator raised his head to glance at me.

‘I’ve got thousands of contacts,’ he reported. ‘It’ll take a while to narrow them down.’

‘Thousands?’ I asked, as he returned to work, my palms itching worse than ever.

‘Void shields to maximum. All gunnery stations stand to,’ the shipmaster said, pretty much confirming what I most feared, before looking across at me as well. ‘Many of them appear to be under power and closing on our position.’

‘Wonderful,’ I said, before realising that sarcasm wasn’t quite what was expected of the dauntless warrior everyone here fondly imagined me to be, and plastering a smile on my face which I hoped would seem sufficiently insouciant. ‘Always something to be said for a target-rich environment. Any idea whose day we’re about to spoil?’

‘Still scanning frequencies,’ the vox operator reported, his voice almost as calm as Yaffel’s mechanical one. ‘Getting something...’

‘Put it on the speakers,’ Gries ordered, and a moment later an overlapping babble of harsh, guttural voices burst into the room.

My stomach knotted, and I took a deep breath, stilling the instinctive surge of panic which swept over me. I recognised that sound all too well, was even able to pick out a word or two I knew. ‘Orks,’ I said.

‘Undoubtedly,’ Gries agreed, no doubt familiar with every enemy of the Imperium I’d ever heard of, and a double handful of ones that I hadn’t. ‘And eager to welcome us in the manner of their kind.’ He looked across at the shipmaster. ‘Engage them at your leisure.’

‘By your command,’ the shipmaster responded, with a grave inclination of his head. ‘All batteries, fire at will.’

I moved across to the hololith, where Yaffel had thoughtfully brought up a tactical display which enabled me to see just how frakked we were. Innumerable greenskin vessels were swarming in on our position, evoking a curious half-memory of Drumon surrounded by the sparring drones, before the full seriousness of our position elbowed the whimsical image aside.

The Chapter serf gunners were disciplined, I have to give them that, holding their fire until they were sure of a target,<sup>61</sup> before unleashing the full fury of their awesome destructive power in a single concentrated salvo which gutted the ramshackle greenskin vessels they’d targeted. For every one they brought down, though, ten surged forwards to fill the gap, and had they been able to concentrate their fire it would all have been over within moments. Fortunately, however, they were as disorganised as ork mobs always are, blazing away in our general direction without seeming to aim, and only a few of their shots struck home. I felt the faint tremor of their impacts through the fabric of the hull with an answering quiver of apprehension, before forcing away the memory of the greenskin attack on the *Hand of Vengeance*, which had come so close to taking my life.

‘Thunderhawks away,’ the auspex man reported a moment later, and a cluster of smaller echoes<sup>62</sup> took up station around the blip which marked our position, doing a very nice job of keeping the greenskin fighters and occasional torpedo volley off our backs. ‘Still no sign of our primary target.’

‘Then it’s probably not here,’ I said, mainly to Gries, but pitching my voice so that my calm, reasonable tones would carry across most of the bridge. ‘And even if it is, it’ll take more than one ship to get to it through this much resistance.’

‘I concur,’ the Space Marine captain rumbled after a moment, much to my well-concealed relief. The overhead luminators flickered, plunging us into momentary darkness, broken only by the eldritch glow of pict screens and lectern lights, before flaring up again.

‘Void shields holding,’ one of the bridge crew reported. ‘Generators two

and nine down. Damage control responding.'

Gries turned to Yaffel, ignoring the clear implications which seemed to me like an unwise degree of single-mindedness. 'Your assessment, magos?'

'The probability of finding the *Spawn of Damnation* still within this system is now approximately seventeen per cent, and falling,' Yaffel said, after conferring with a couple of his junior tech-priests. 'Analysis of the auspex echoes can only go so far, however; the five per cent of anomalies requiring further investigation we found last time would appear to be something of an irreducible minimum.'

'Then we remain until the probability drops to five per cent,' Gries said, 'before proceeding to the next emergence point. If none exists, we will have to return in numbers sufficient to secure this system while we investigate the remaining anomalies.'

Well, good luck with that, I thought, resolving that if we got out of here in one piece I'd kiss a gretchin before allowing myself to be dragged along on so patently suicidal an endeavour. Which reminded me... I tapped the comm-bead in my ear. 'Jurgen,' I said, 'the ship's under attack by greenskins. Don't alarm Miss DuPanya unduly, but if you can persuade her to get dressed, and ready to move in a hurry, it might be wise.'

'Very good, sir,' my aide responded, in his habitual phlegmatic manner. 'Don't want to get caught on the hop again, like we did off Perlia, do we?'

'No, we don't,' I agreed, not envying the task I'd inflicted on him. Mira would probably have just got back to sleep, and wouldn't take at all kindly to being roused again. Better cranky than dead, though, in my view, and if the ork gunners' aim improved in the next few minutes we could all be breathing vacuum if we weren't light on our feet. (Not an experience I'd recommend, or wish to repeat.)

The deck shook under my feet again, and we were plunged into darkness, for nearly two seconds this time. When the luminators rekindled, they had a red tinge to them, which made the bridge look uncomfortably as though someone had sprayed it with blood.

'Starboard shields down,' the man at the engineeer's station reported dispassionately. 'DCT<sup>63</sup> reports reconsecration will take at least ten minutes.'

'That's too long--' I began, just as the auspex man glanced up from his pict screen.

'Mass torpedo barrage incoming,' he said, a blizzard of contact icons

erupting into the space between us and the orks.

‘Throne on Earth!’ I breathed, horrified. There was no way in the galaxy that the Thunderhawks could intercept that many missiles, but they gave it their best shot, managing to whittle them down by about ten per cent before they struck. Which only left enough to tear the guts out of the cruiser instead of vaporising it.

I braced myself for the ripple of impacts, but instead of the explosions I’d expected, I felt no more than the faintest of tremors through the soles of my boots, as the fast-moving projectiles impacted without detonating against the adamantium hull plates. ‘They didn’t go off!’ I said, buoyed up by a sudden surge of relief, which dissipated almost at once as the obvious explanation occurred to me. ‘They must be—’

‘Prepare to repel boarders,’ Gries voxed through the ship’s internal speakers, confirming my conclusion before I could voice it. He turned back to Yaffel. ‘Magos?’

‘The probability of a successful detection is down to eight point five per cent,’ the tech-priest informed him, his voice as uninflected as ever. It might have been my imagination, of course, but I was sure he was oscillating more than usual, however.

‘Then recall the Thunderhawks,’ Gries said, ‘and prepare to withdraw as soon as it falls to five per cent.’

The shipmaster nodded, and opened a vox channel of his own. ‘Bridge to enginarium,’ he said crisply. ‘Prepare for entry into the warp.’

For the second time in as many minutes, my sigh of relief was choked off before completion. Instead of the acknowledgement we’d all been expecting from Drumon or one of the serf enginseers under his supervision, the speaker rang with the sounds of combat and the bellowing war cries of orks. The greenskins had breached the enginarium, and until they were evicted, we wouldn’t be going anywhere.

I must say, we all took it remarkably calmly under the circumstances. Or, to be honest, everyone else did, responding to the unexpected reversal with a flurry of sharp, succinct orders, while I kept a panicky eye on the hololith for any further signs of a greenskin assault. They weren’t slow in coming either, with several more waves of boarding torpedoes already inbound, although with the Thunderhawks out of the way, our gunners were reaping a rich harvest of them, having switched their aim from the larger warships.

Fortunately, the apparent scramble to claim us as a prize meant that any more destructive incoming fire from the surrounding fleet was sporadic at best, and no more accurate than you might expect, so all in all we were still getting off far more lightly than I would have believed possible. It also probably didn't hurt that several of the greenskin vessels were now exchanging fire with one another, the instinctive aggression of their kind finding a more immediate form of expression now that the battle for the *Revenant* had reached something of a standstill from their point of view.

'Squad Trosque is *en route* to the enginarium,' Gries informed the shipmaster, and a sudden sense of foreboding seized me in its talons. I was standing in the middle of the prime target for a boarding party, with Emperor alone knew how many orks charging towards it as fast as their malformed legs could carry them.

I tapped my comm-bead again. 'Jurgen,' I said, 'the greenskins have boarded the *Revenant*. Numbers unknown. Any sign of them where you are?'

'Not yet, commissar,' my aide responded, sounding a trifle disgruntled if I was any judge. Clearly, Mira had proven to be as acrimonious as I'd anticipated. At least he'd be able to take it out on the orks, though, which I'd no doubt he would, with as much relish as any Valhallan finding a greenskin in his sights.<sup>64</sup> 'Would you like me to go hunting?'

'No, better stay where you are,' I told him, 'and keep an eye on the Viridian envoy.' I'd never hear the last of it, I had no doubt, but the idea of Mira on the loose with a shipful of orks to run into hardly bore thinking about. The mood she was in, she'd probably challenge one to a head-butting contest.

'Oh,' Jurgen said, in the tone I knew all too well was the precursor to telling me something I really didn't want to know. 'I'm afraid the young lady isn't here at the moment, sir. She told me she was coming up to the bridge to see you.'

'Did she?' I said, my stomach plunging to somewhere in the region of my boots. There was no point asking him why he hadn't accompanied her. I'd ordered him to wake her up, and that he'd done, as punctiliously as he fulfilled every other order he was given. And, if I'm honest, in his place I'd have been as pleased to see the back of her as he'd undoubtedly been.

'Would you like me to go after her, sir?' Jurgen offered.

'No, stay in the guest quarters,' I told him, after a fractional pause for



thought. They were about as far removed from anything strategically important as it was possible to get aboard the strike cruiser, and although orks weren't exactly renowned for sophisticated tactical analysis, their brutish instincts were often a reasonable substitute. It was still possible that a party of them might blunder in there anyway, of course, but on balance it was as close to a safe refuge as we were likely to find. 'Do whatever you can to make them defensible, and wait for me there. I'll go and retrieve Miss DuPanya.'

I could turn this to my advantage, I thought, as I filled Gries in on this development as succinctly as I could. 'I'm about as much use here as a heretic's oath at the moment,' I concluded, almost in the same breath as Yaffel reporting that if the blasted space hulk was anywhere in the system we weren't going to find it now, so we might as well move on as soon as the little ork problem in the enginarium had been dealt with,<sup>65</sup> 'and we can hardly leave her wandering around on her own under the circumstances. If you've no objection, I'll go and escort her back to her quarters.' Which ought to leave me well out of the way if the greenskins attacked the bridge, as I still expected them to at any moment.

'Of course,' Gries said, apparently taking my evident eagerness to get out there for a thinly disguised desire to bag a few orks. 'May the Emperor walk with you.' He made the Mechanicus cogwheel gesture again and turned away to discuss the tactical situation with the shipmaster, no doubt relieved to know that Mira wouldn't be blundering in to distract everyone at some crucial point in the battle if I could get to her first.

I left the bridge as quickly as I could and trotted down the main corridor leading away from it, my weapons in my hands. I was pretty sure I knew which route Mira would take from the guest quarters, and was confident of being able to intercept her without too much difficulty. As I reached the first junction of the corridor, I found a contingent of the ship's crew setting up a lascannon on a tripod, while others settled behind a makeshift barricade with lasguns in their hands, and I began to wonder if my decision to leave the bridge had been a trifle hasty, but there was nothing to be done about that now; and at least I had another bolthole to run for if the greenskins turned out to be between me and the relative safety of the guest quarters after all. Feeling mildly reassured by that, I moved on after exchanging a few words with the petty officer in charge.

They were the last people I saw for some time, however. The corridors

seemed eerily silent, the Chapter serfs I was used to seeing passing to and fro on errands of their own absent about more urgent business, and my footfalls echoed on the deck plates more loudly than they normally did, unmuffled by the ambient sounds of other activity. It seemed to be taking an inordinate amount of time to find Mira, and I was on the point of giving up and retracing my steps, in the belief that she must have got lost in the labyrinth of interconnecting passageways, when I finally became aware of the sound of footsteps other than my own.

I tensed, taking a firmer grip on the hilt of my chainsword, and flattened myself against the metallic wall of the corridor. I was close to one of the maintenance hatches, which riddled them at intervals. Pointless attempting to seek refuge in one of the utility areas in this case, though, as the hatches were all kept securely locked, and I hadn't yet found a plausible pretext to ask for the access codes. After listening intently for a moment I was able to reassure myself that the footsteps were too light to be those of orks, and, in any case, if the voices in my comm-bead could be relied on, the greenskin boarding parties were all being successfully engaged elsewhere around the ship.

Thus reassured, I stepped out of concealment in the recess containing the utility hatch, just as Mira strode past, her expression grim. She was not, I surmised, pleased to see me.

'I suppose you think this is some kind of joke,' she began, before registering the weapons in my hands and moderating her voice a little. 'What are you carrying those for? You can't just open a window and take a shot at the enemy.'

'I won't have to,' I told her shortly. 'They've boarded us. Where's your gun?'

'Still in my portmanteau, of course.' She scowled pettishly. 'Your rank little imbecile didn't bother to mention that particular detail, just the attacking ships.'

'He didn't know anything about the boarders until I told him a couple of minutes ago,' I said shortly. Her description of Jurgen was undeniably accurate, but it irked me nonetheless. 'Come on.'

'Where to?' Mira, it seemed, wasn't about to let the trivial matter of a horde of greenskins on the loose divert her from the more pressing concern of her irritation with me and my aide for disturbing her rest. 'Shouldn't you be off shooting orks or something?'

‘Maybe I should,’ I said, on the point of turning away and leaving her to it. After all, I could always tell Gries I hadn’t found her in time if the orks caught up with her before we eliminated them all. ‘I just had this rather strange notion of making sure you were safe first.’

‘Did you?’ Her expression softened, and for a moment I remembered why I’d liked her, until her corrosive personality began to leak out around the edges. ‘So what did you have in mind?’

‘Getting you back to the guest quarters, to start with,’ I said, beginning to move off in the direction from which she’d come. It seemed she had enough sense to follow me without urging, for which I was grateful; the last thing I needed under the circumstances was a further round of bickering.

We hurried back through the eerily deserted corridors, our footfalls ringing loudly despite all we could do to muffle them, and Mira glanced at me with a trace of the bravado I remembered from the day we’d first met. ‘Remind you of anything?’ she asked, and I nodded.

‘We do seem to be making a habit of this,’ I agreed, just as the shipmaster’s voice suddenly burst into my earpiece, effectively dispelling any inclination I might have had to swap further banter.

‘Incoming. Brace for impact.’

‘Hang on to something,’ I said, and it seemed Mira trusted my judgement enough to do so without further argument. She took hold of the handle of another of the ubiquitous utility hatches, and looked at me quizzically. ‘Another wave just got past the guns.’

Before she could formulate a reply, the deck trembled a little beneath our feet, a faint vibration barely perceptible through the soles of our boots. Mira let go of the metallic protuberance and took a step towards me, her testiness evidently intensified by the anticlimax and the sense of having been made to look foolish. ‘Well, that was hardly—’ she began, just as a deafening clangour of brutally maltreated metal assaulted my ears, drowning out whatever else she might have been about to say. The deck rippled beneath my bootsoles, and a section of the ceiling appeared to decide it would be happier as a wall, swinging down to meet the deck plates in a shower of sparks and trailing conduit.

‘You were saying?’ I asked mildly, as Mira scrambled to her feet and glared at me as though the whole thing was somehow my fault.

‘A gentleman would have helped me up,’ she told me witheringly.

‘Hands full. Sorry,’ I replied insincerely. Only an idiot would relinquish

either of the weapons I was currently holding under the circumstances. Now don't get me wrong, I've as much time for chivalry as the next man when there's something to be gained by it, or at least nothing to lose, but an impact that big must have meant that a boarding torpedo had hit no more than a deck or two from us, which put the greenskins far too close for comfort so far as I was concerned. I tapped the vox in my ear. 'Cain to bridge, hull breach in Section K, deck fifteen or thereabouts.'

'Acknowledged,' a calm voice replied, conspicuously unaccompanied by any sounds of combat, and I began to regret my impulsive decision to leave there even more strongly. 'Your current position?'

'K fifteen,' I said. 'Escorting the Viridian envoy to safety.' Which sounded a lot better than putting as much distance as I could between me and any greenskins who might have been aboard the projectile. It never occurred to me to question whether they'd survived an impact which would have reduced a human to a small, unpleasant stain.<sup>66</sup> I'd seen more than enough of their ability to shrug off almost as much damage as a power-armoured Space Marine on Perlia to be certain that some at least would be pulling themselves out of the wreckage even as I spoke. I glanced at the tangle of collapsed and twisted metal which effectively barred us from our original objective now, and gestured to Mira with the hand holding my laspistol, back the way we'd come. 'This way,' I told her. 'We'll have to get round it.'

'Right.' She nodded, decisively, the clear and present danger we were in obvious enough to forestall any further frivolous objections, and beginning to display some of the fortitude which had sustained her in the tunnels under Fidelis. 'At least that should be as much of a barrier to the orks as it is to us,' she added, with a final glance at the collapsed ceiling before moving to join me.

Hardly had the words left her mouth, though, than the utility hatch she'd been leaning on just a few moments before suddenly bulged perceptibly, the thin sheet metal from which it was formed twisting under the impact of a blow which reverberated between the corridor walls like the tolling of a cathedral bell. 'Run!' I shouted, as the sound was repeated, but before I could take my own advice the flimsy hatch popped from its hinges, framing a sight I'd hoped never to see again (but which I continued to see more often than I can count over the years): the head and shoulders of a snarling, blood-crazed ork, which bellowed in exultation the second it saw us, and charged.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## TWELVE

Luckily for us, and unluckily for the greenskin, my weapons were already in my hands, and with reflexes sharpened by paranoia I cracked off a couple of las-bolts the second I saw it. Both rounds hit their mark, inflicting wounds which would have crippled or killed a human, but which only seemed to annoy the ork. Not for the first time, I found myself marvelling at their resilience even as I cursed it. The shots did serve to distract the brute, however; as it pushed its way through the narrow gap, the frame of the hatchway deforming to admit the full width of its shoulders, it staggered from the impact, catching its foot against the threshold. Pivoting adroitly out of the way of the toppling slab of bellowing, spittle-spraying malevolence, I decapitated it neatly with a single stroke of my chainsword, and turned to run before either segment of the creature had hit the deck plates.

‘What are you waiting for?’ I shouted, finding my way blocked by Mira, who, to my amazement, was trotting towards the downed ork with an expression of grim determination on her face.

‘I need a weapon,’ she said, stooping towards the outflung hand which still clutched a huge, crudely made pistol.

‘Not that one!’ I shouted, knocking her out of the way just as the cadaver’s terminal muscle spasm tightened its finger on the trigger, and the spot she’d been standing on abruptly became a hole in the deck and a blizzard of razor-edged metal shards. Even if she could have prised the ork’s hand open, a dubious proposition at the best of times, grabbing the gun wouldn’t have

helped her much in any case: she'd have had trouble even lifting the thing, and any attempt to fire it would simply have dumped her on her well-padded aristocratic arse, probably breaking her arm in the process.<sup>67</sup> Now was hardly the time to be explaining all this, though, so I simply pointed at the howling, frenzied mob of greenskins fighting one other to get through the gap in the wall, while the brighter ones began to dismember their erstwhile comrade in an attempt to get past the obstructing corpse to reach us. 'Run!'

Stubborn and argumentative she may have been, but Mira was no fool. She was hard on my heels as I pelted along the corridor, intent on nothing more than opening up as big a lead as I could before the orks could force their way past the cadaver, and one another. A brief burst of gunfire behind us spurred me on, indicating as it did that the question of precedence had now been settled in the traditional orkish fashion, and that the vanguard was probably already in pursuit. 'What's your plan?' she panted.

'Don't get eaten,' I said. I'd be the first to admit it wasn't much of one, but it had always worked up until now. I activated my comm-bead. 'Cain to bridge, contact confirmed, hostiles engaged.' (Which I thought sounded a lot better than 'run away from after a lucky hit.') 'Oh, and the Viridian envoy's still with me.'

'Acknowledged.' The Space Marine captain sounded a little distracted, even given the current emergency. As he paused, the faint sounds of combat drifted through the tiny vox receiver in my ear. It seemed the orks were assaulting the bridge, just as I'd feared, but had yet to break through the defences I'd seen being erected on my way out.<sup>68</sup> 'All units are currently engaged.' In other words, good luck, you're on your own.

'May the Emperor protect,' I said as I signed off, which he was welcome to interpret as encouragement if he liked. I had someone a little closer in mind for His attention, and couldn't help wishing He'd had a few spare Space Marines to make the job easier.

'I'm on my way, commissar,' a new voice cut in, and I'd be lying if I didn't admit to feeling a sudden surge of relief at the familiar sound of Jurgen's phlegm-thickened tones. Here, at least, was aid I knew I could rely on, even if it was going to take a while to get here.

'We'll save a few greenskins for you,' I assured him. No Valhallan Guardsman would relish sitting on the sidelines while there were orks to be shot, and I was certain he'd been chafing under my orders to remain where

he was. 'Any sign of them down there?'

'Not even the sniff of one,' Jurgen said, his faintly resentful tone confirming my guess.

'Then we'll meet you halfway,' I told him. It appeared I'd been right about the guest quarters being as close to a safe refuge as anyone could find aboard the *Revenant* under the circumstances, so it seemed a pity not to take advantage of the fact. Jurgen may have lacked my affinity for three-dimensional mazes, but his straightforward mental processes would more than make up for that. I'd have bet my pension (which, like every other commissar in the field, I never really expected to be claiming in any case) that he'd simply head for K fifteen by the shortest possible route, and Mork<sup>69</sup> help any greenskin standing in his way.

'Meet who, halfway to where?' Mira demanded, only having heard one side of the conversation, and I filled her in as rapidly as I could.

'Jurgen, the guest quarters. There's fighting going on all over the ship, so it seems the best place to keep you safe.' There were always the saviour pods, of course, but taking to them would definitely be the last resort: our chances of surviving in a system crawling with orks were negligible. The *Revenant*, on the other hand, was our home ground, albeit infested with greenskins. If they weren't reinforced again too quickly, we might yet turn the tide.

As if to mock my hopes, the voice of the auspex operator rang in my comm-bead almost as soon as I'd completed the thought. 'Incoming torpedo volley. Stand by to repel more boarders.'

'Like we're just going to ignore them,' I muttered irritably, receiving a sharp look from Mira, who probably wondered if I was finally cracking under the strain. Before she could distil her disquiet into a typically acidic comment, however, the rather more welcome voice of Drumon crackled in my ear.

'Enginarium purged. Transiting now.'

Hardly had he finished speaking than the synapse-wrenching sensation which usually accompanied entry to the warp swept over me, more strongly than I could recall ever having felt it before; clearly, whatever the Techmarine had done, he'd done in a hurry, without time to complete all the necessary rituals. As the wave of nausea pounded through my body, I still found it in me to thank the Emperor that he'd managed it. The wave of reinforcements the auspex op had just detected would be passing harmlessly



through empty space by now,<sup>70</sup> instead of injecting another dose of poison into our reeling vessel, and the balance of the battle had just tipped decisively in our favour. Now it would just be a matter of tracking down the ones who'd already made it aboard, and eliminating them.

'What the hell was that?' Mira asked, her face preternaturally pale after depositing her supper on the deck plates.

Checking the impulse to respond 'Looks like it used to be florn cakes,' I shrugged. 'We're back in the warp. Drumon got us out in the nick of time.'

'Well he could have been a bit more careful,' Mira shot back. 'I feel awful.'

'You'd have felt a lot worse with another wave of greenskins rampaging through the ship,' I pointed out, perhaps not as tactfully as I might have done, but I still wasn't feeling too good myself, don't forget. Hardly had the words left my mouth than a bellow of triumphant rage behind us reminded me that there were still more than enough orks aboard to be going on with. 'Run!'

'Run? I can hardly walk!' Mira snapped back, clearly well on the road to recovery. She turned her head, and apparently decided she could run quite well after all, as she caught sight of the mob of orks rounding the last turn we'd taken in the corridor. There were five of them, the two in front filling the passageway from side to side, all brandishing *shootas*<sup>71</sup> like the one I'd dissuaded Mira from picking up in one hand, and equally crude axes in the other.

The one in front had a metal jaw, which I'm bound to say hardly improved his appearance, and more scar tissue than Gries. Clearly the most dangerous, and therefore the new leader. The rest were little better, particularly the one who seemed to have taken a bath in acid some time in the past, who glared at the world through a single, red-rimmed augmetic eye, and whose stance at Metaljaw's shoulder was enough to tell me that the two of them had fought together long enough to watch each other's backs as effectively as a greenskin could.

Before I could get a decent look at the rest, bolts and solid slugs began making a mess of the wall near where we stood, but fortunately they appeared to be no better shots than most of their kind. It could only be a matter of time before they got lucky though, so I ducked down the nearest cross passage, Mira at my heels.

'Why didn't you shoot back?' she demanded, with a single glance over her

shoulder to see if the greenskins had reached the junction yet. I didn't bother, secure in the knowledge that a renewed fusillade would announce their presence as soon as they could see us again, and turned into the first cross corridor which would take us back towards our original route. The last thing I needed now was Jurgen missing us because of the impromptu diversion.

'Because I'd have to be damn lucky to bring one down, and the rest would be on us by the time I did,' I explained, reminding myself that she'd never seen the creatures before, so she wouldn't have anything like the hard-won appreciation I did for their resilience and ferocity.

No doubt recalling the exaggerated stories she'd heard about my exploits on Perlia, Mira nodded briskly. 'Can we outrun them, then?' she asked.

'I doubt it,' I said. We might stay ahead of them for a while, but their superior strength and endurance would tell against us in the end.

'Then we need an edge.' She slowed, and looked speculatively at the nearest of the ubiquitous access panels, to which a prayer slip had been affixed by a wax seal, the freshness of both mute testament to the diligence of the *Revenant's* engineers. 'Can you get one of these open?'

By way of an answer, I swung my chainsword, chewing through the thin metal in seconds and a shower of sparks. No doubt the tech-priests would be horrified by so casual a desecration of even this minor a shrine to the Omnissiah, but it was nothing compared to the damage the orks would do to the ship if left unchecked. Or to us, come to that, which I must admit was of rather more pressing concern to me. 'What have you got in mind?'

Mira smiled for the first time since I'd run into her. 'An old hunter's trick,' she said, starting to pull wires from the gap between the walls.

I have to admit I'd had my doubts about the wisdom of going along with this, every second we delayed eroding our hard-won lead, but I stayed to cover the corner around which I expected the orks to come at any moment, while Mira busied herself with the cables she'd extracted. It seemed that despite my earlier scepticism in the bunker below the palace in Fidelis, her hunting trips had indeed endowed her with some knowledge and skills which might be of use to us in the present emergency. Her marksmanship, quite exceptional for a civilian, I already had good reason to be grateful for, so it seemed worth the risk to tarry a moment or two to see what else she had up her sleeve. Besides, I was confident that I could run faster than her if push came to shove, and our pursuers got too close.

‘Finished,’ she said, after a tense few moments, and not before time, as the clatter of iron-shod feet against deck plates was beginning to reverberate through my spine. ‘Can I borrow this?’

Before I could even ask what ‘this’ was, she snatched my cap from my head, and reached up to hook it on a length of wire she’d thrown over a pipe running along the centre of the ceiling. My purloined headgear swung in the middle of the corridor, a little above my head and about face height for an ork. I didn’t have the faintest idea what she intended to achieve by it, other than drawing their fire perhaps, but my neck seemed a great deal more important than my hat, so I simply started running again.

‘Not too far,’ Mira said, laying a hand on my arm. ‘You’ll be round the next corner before they can see us.’ Well, that sounded fine to me. She seemed to have some idea of what she was doing though, so I slowed my pace a little and took refuge behind the next junction, levelling my laspistol back the way we’d come. Letting them see us was one thing, but I wasn’t stupid enough to stand out in the open where they’d have a clear shot. Even an ork can hit the target occasionally.

They burst into view in a clump, jostling for position as they always did, which no doubt had slowed them down considerably and bought us enough time for Mira to do whatever it was she’d been doing. I flexed my finger on the trigger, tightening it to the point where the slightest movement would be sufficient to fire. My hours of practice against the hovering cyberskulls in the training chapel had paid off handsomely, my grip on the weapon as assured and instinctive with my new augmetic fingers as it had ever been with my original ones; even more so, if anything, as I’d found it easier to remain precisely on aim without the faint tremors no amount of training and discipline can quite eliminate.<sup>72</sup> I held back, though, wanting to be sure of a target. I still hadn’t the faintest idea what Mira had been up to, and the last thing I wanted to do was throw away whatever advantage she’d brought us by precipitate action.

The first thing the greenskins saw was my hat, of course, all of them staring at it with expressions of vague confusion, which is the closest their kind can come to any form of cerebral activity. Their headlong rush slowed, and they began to move down the corridor towards us, grunting and barking in their barbarous tongue, which I was familiar enough with to gather that the one I’d killed had indeed been their leader, and that his successor was still attempting to impose his authority on the others.<sup>73</sup>

‘If you wouldn’t mind shooting them?’ Mira asked irritably, so I took careful aim at Metaljaw, since he was the one shouting the most, which is usually a reliable indicator of status among greenskins, and squeezed the trigger. I’d only intended getting their attention, which was presumably what Mira had in mind, but I succeeded beyond my wildest expectations: I fired just as my target opened his mouth to bellow at a recalcitrant subordinate, and by great fortune my las-bolt hit him in the back of the throat, exiting through his skull and taking most of his brain with it.

For a fraction of a second the surviving greenskins stood in stupefied astonishment, watching another leader topple to the deck plates, then as one they reacted, charging forwards with a roar of ‘WAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!’ Despite this, I felt a faint surge of optimism. I’d seen many times on Perlia that once a group of orks falls below a critical proportion of their original number they tend to lose heart for the fray, breaking off to seek out another mob to join instead of pressing their attack. If I could just pick off another, that might be enough to shake the resolve of the rest.

But before I could squeeze the trigger again, the space beyond my sights was suddenly devoid of ork. The whole group of them had fallen, sprawling across the deck plates like drunkards in a drinking den, thrashing and bellowing with rage as they tried to rise, hampering each other as they flailed around like tantrum-throwing toddlers.

Mira looked at them with a faint air of disappointment. ‘I was hoping they’d drop their weapons,’ she said.

‘That was your brilliant idea?’ I asked, with a touch of asperity, getting ready to flee again. There was about as much chance of an ork dropping his weapons as deciding to take up flower arranging. ‘A tripwire?’ Which explained why she’d needed my hat, of course: the first principle of setting a booby trap is to direct the victim’s attention elsewhere.

‘Mostly,’ she admitted.

‘Then shouldn’t we be running again?’ I asked, with a hint of impatience. The only point of a tripwire would be to delay our pursuers, and standing around while they stood up and dusted themselves off would throw away that momentary advantage.

‘Maybe,’ Mira said, still looking back down the corridor with an air of vague expectation, and showing no signs of movement. Acidface had scrambled to his feet by now, bellowing imprecations at the others, and swatted at my dangling cap with the axe in his hand, no doubt relieving his

feelings in the most direct fashion he could.

As the crude weapon smacked into my headgear, a blue-white arc of energy sparked across to the metal blade, and the ork spasmed, roaring and bellowing as he suddenly completed a circuit with the cable Mira had strung across the corridor. His comrades were caught in the discharge too, thrashing on the metal floor like fish on a griddle, their own ululations echoing loudly enough to pain the ears.

‘That went about as well as could be expected,’ Mira said, her expression now smug in the extreme.

I looked at her, then back to the twitching pile of smouldering orks. ‘Why didn’t you barbecue yourself while you were setting that up?’ I asked, in some perplexity.

Mira shrugged. ‘Rubber-soled boots,’ she said. ‘Saves time rigging the shock fence round a camp. It’s an—’

‘Old hunter’s trick,’ I finished for her. ‘Next time you see that old hunter, thank him for me.’

Before she could reply, the abused power feed finally shorted out, and the standing greenskin collapsed on top of his comrades, with a faint clatter of falling weaponry. A fresh odour, pungent and familiar, forced its way past the stench of charring ork, and I turned to greet my aide.

‘Jurgen,’ I said. ‘Prompt as always.’ I indicated the feebly stirring mound of incapacitated greenskins behind me. ‘If you wouldn’t mind?’ I could quite easily have put a las-bolt through each of their heads myself, but I’d promised to save him a few, and he’d only have sulked if I didn’t.

‘Of course, sir,’ he said, and trotted off to administer the *coup de grace* to the fallen with every sign of enthusiasm. A few moments later he returned, bearing my cap, which he handed to me with a faint air of puzzlement. ‘I’ll have to see what I can do with this,’ he said, ‘but I’m afraid it’s a little singed.’



## THIRTEEN

As I'd surmised, now they'd been deprived of the almost infinite number of reinforcements they'd surely been counting on to take the *Revenant*, the remaining greenskins were easy meat for the Reclaimers. Tracking them down took a little time, of course, given the size of the vessel, but a fully-grown ork isn't exactly hard to miss, and the Adeptus Astartes were extremely adept at xenos hunting. By the time Gries called a meeting to discuss the situation, the shredded remains of the last one had been hauled away to the taxidermist,<sup>74</sup> and the ship's engineers were inhaling through their teeth<sup>75</sup> at the damage all those bolter shells had done to their nice clean bulkheads. Mira had, of course, been invited, but to no one's surprise elected to return to bed instead. Before doing so she disinterred her laspistol from the bottom of her luggage and tucked it under her pillow, as I habitually did. Better late than never, I supposed, but just in case there was still a *kommando*<sup>76</sup> lurking somewhere in the bowels of the ship, I'd asked Jurgen to keep an eye on the corridor. Needless to say, his vigil was a vain one, but he took the disappointment as stoically as he did everything else.

Which left Gries, Drumon, Yaffel and me arranged about the hololith, while the ship's crew scurried around us tidying up the bridge. The damage in here appeared remarkably slight, although the number of holes, scorch-marks and disquieting stains in the surrounding corridors bore mute and eloquent testament to the ferocity of the battle to preserve it. Hard to tell if I'd have been better off remaining here after all, or whether, despite my misadventures, I'd been prudent to get out while I could, so I gave up

speculating about it in favour of the discussion.

‘Damage to the enginarium was severe,’ Drumon reported, ‘but the guardian spirits of the circuit breakers responded promptly, preserving the core systems from harm. Our engineers are performing the rites of reactivation, and have already honoured the guardians. The warp engines are performing as well as one might expect after a cold start, but will need shutting down for complete resanctification after we next emerge into the materium.’

‘That sounds like a long job,’ I ventured cautiously, not liking the sound of it at all. If our next port of call turned out to be a firewasp nest like the one we’d just escaped from, the last thing we needed was to find ourselves stranded there with no line of retreat.

‘Roughly nine days standard,’ Drumon replied promptly. ‘Half that if we put in to a void station with a Mechanicus shrine, but we might as well wish for a forge world this deep into the Gulf.’

‘I’ll happily settle for a system free of orks,’ I told him, while Gries and Yaffel reflexively meshed their fingers in the cogwheel gesture of the Adeptus Mechanicus, in response to the passing reference to one of the hallowed worlds devoted to the works of the Machine-God.

‘Under the circumstances, so will I,’ Drumon agreed.

‘Then we must trust to the Omnissiah to provide the respite our systems require,’ Gries said, in a voice which made it clear he’d take a dim view of it failing to honour the request, and moved on to the main topic on the agenda. ‘Though your resourcefulness saved our vessel, it may have put the success of our mission at some hazard.’

‘Quite so.’ Yaffel nodded, oscillating a little as he always did, and went on. ‘The conditions under which we enter the warp are crucial to our ability to follow the right current. Being somewhat distracted at the time,<sup>77</sup> I was unable to complete the relevant calculations before we made the transition, which in turn renders our ability to detect the next emergence point problematic at best.’

‘What’s the worst-case scenario?’ I asked, to show I was paying attention, and trying not to seem visibly pleased that this fool’s errand sounded likely to be coming to an end before too much longer. There was bound to be a Guard presence on any Imperial worlds in the vicinity, to discourage opportunistic raiding by our recent hosts, so if I made myself known, I should be able to find a ship heading back to Coronus without too much

trouble. Mentioning this prior to my departure might get back to Mira, however, so I kept my own counsel, wary of finding her turning up at the bottom of the boarding ramp again.

‘That we fail to find the emergence point at all, or any clue as to its whereabouts,’ Yaffel said, looking at me as though I was a simpleton.

‘And what are the chances of that?’ I asked, refusing to be deflected. If I could get them to realise the mission was hopeless for themselves, it would circumvent any amount of arguing later on.

‘Somewhere on the order of three per cent,’ the wavering magos told me, looking as perturbed as though that was a real possibility.

‘Why so high?’ I asked, before reflecting that perhaps sarcasm wasn’t particularly sensible under the circumstances, neither Gries nor Yaffel having shown much of a sense of humour about our quest. If either was offended by my flippancy, or even noticed it, come to that, they gave no sign, however. Yaffel merely gestured to the hololith, where the glowing green funnel was still projected over the starfield.

‘We’ve been able to refine our estimates,’ he said, ‘but only so far. Given the flow of the current we’re now in, our destination could be any one of these three systems, with a probability of seventeen, twelve and thirty-two per cent respectively. Other, less likely, destinations are here.’ A rash of icons appeared throughout the cone, a few in planetary systems, the vast majority in the deep gulf between them. As I regarded these, I felt a faint shiver of apprehension; if we ended up in the void between the stars, and for some reason the warp engines failed to respond to Drumon’s ministrations, we would all surely die in the fathomless dark, centuries from succour even at the best speed our vessel was capable of in the material realm.

‘What if we return to the orkhold and re-enter the current after your calculations are complete?’ Gries asked, as calmly as if committing suicide like that was a perfectly reasonable proposal.

To my horror, Yaffel nodded. ‘I’ve considered this,’ he said, his tone so even that they might merely have been discussing the weather, rather than condemning us all to certain death. All of a sudden, making a run for it in a saviour pod was beginning to look positively attractive. ‘My estimate of a ninety-seven per cent probability of success was predicated on us having done so.’

‘We’ll have to lay over and resanctify the system before we try that,’



Drumon said firmly. 'A lot of the machine-spirits are still traumatised, and need to be healed before we can take the ship into combat again.'

'So it looks as though we'll just have to carry on looking for the *Spawn*'s next emergence point for the time being,' I said, trying not to sound too relieved. If we found it, all well and good; either the hulk would be there, or we'd carry on searching, and either way there'd be no reason to return to an ork-infested hellhole. On the other hand, if we didn't, at least I'd have nine days or thereabouts to find a plausible excuse to leave them to it – and failing that, there was always the pods. 'What are our chances of success under the present circumstances?'

'No more than seventy-two per cent,' Yaffel said gloomily, and I resisted the temptation to throw the nearest heavy object at him, with what I still consider a heroic feat of self-control. I'd come out ahead on considerably longer odds than that, on innumerable occasions, and said so. If I'm honest, I was almost giddy with relief, but still in sufficient control of my faculties to refrain from telling the desiccated tech-priest precisely what I thought about his willingness to sacrifice the lot of us just to tidy up his sums.

'Let us hope your confidence is justified, commissar,' Gries said dryly, and on that encouraging note the meeting came to an end.

With so much at stake, it was hardly surprising that the next few weeks were more than a little tense. I whiled away the time as best I could with one piece of makework after another, relishing my daily exercise with the practice drones, and a couple of sparring sessions with Drumon, who seemed as relieved to get away from his duties as I was. Though he never said so directly, I soon inferred that the orks had left a considerable legacy of damage behind them, and the task of coordinating the repairs was an onerous one. Despite my best efforts to ignore them, Yaffel's words had left me feeling unsettled, and although I knew the chances of being dragged back to the orks' domain on a suicidal attempt to make his calculations come out right were remote (practically non-existent if I had anything to do with it), I couldn't shake a nagging sense of disquiet, which refused to leave me entirely except when I was engaged in physical exercise.

Perhaps as a result of this, or perhaps because electrocuting a mob of orks seemed to have put her in a better mood, I found myself spending more time with Mira again. I can't claim to have enjoyed her company as much as I had done back in Fidelis, but her enthusiasm for mine seemed

undiminished, and as I've noted before, my opportunities for social interaction aboard the *Revenant* were somewhat circumscribed. To be honest, I'd been a little wary of renewing our association at first, a faint voice at the back of my mind still insisting that this was a bad idea, for reasons I couldn't quite articulate, whenever I could be bothered to listen to it. But as the days passed, and she kept the virago side of her personality under better control, I began to feel a little more comfortable around her. Perhaps too much so; otherwise I'd certainly have paid more attention to the itching in my palms, which continued to flare up from time to time in the middle of apparently innocuous conversations.

There was one in particular which sticks in my mind, although the full significance of it didn't really occur to me at the time. Spurred on by our recent encounter with the greenskins, I'd been telling her a few colourful lies over a leisurely supper together about my supposedly glorious campaign to liberate Perlia from their kindred, and been duly rewarded by oohs and aahs of wide-eyed credulity in most of the right places – then she looked at me over the rim of her goblet as though taking aim.

'Haven't you ever thought about doing something else with your life?' she asked, in the studiously neutral fashion she tended to adopt when trying to pretend she didn't care about the answer. I shook my head, in some perplexity, completely taken aback.

'Haven't you?' I asked in return, knowing that my question was equally ridiculous. Mira had been born into the ruling family of an Imperial world, destined since birth to take a hand in the governance of it, and her education and upbringing had no doubt been predicated on that assumption; she was no more in control of her own destiny than I was. From the day I'd been earmarked as a future commissar by a schola progenium functionary with a twisted sense of humour,<sup>78</sup> my destiny had been set in stone, just as surely as Mira's, but without the limitless wealth which had no doubt made her adolescence a great deal more comfortable than mine.

'All the time,' she said to my surprise, an unexpected air of wistfulness entering her tone. Then she smiled, as if to make light of the revelation, and shrugged, setting up interesting oscillations in the clinging gold fabric of her favourite gown – which still made her look like a joygirl if you asked me. (Not that I considered that aspect of her appearance much of a disadvantage.) 'But I've never had the chance.' She glanced slyly at me. 'Not until now.'

‘Being offworld, you mean,’ I said, managing to look as though I was interested without too much difficulty. This was a happy knack I’d acquired early enough in life to make my time at the schola more tolerable than it might otherwise have been, and which had served me well in my subsequent career.

Mira nodded. ‘Partly,’ she agreed. She had a conspiratorial air about her now, as though she were about to impart some intimate confidence and feared being overheard by eavesdropping servants. Although since Jurgen was still the closest thing either of us had to domestic staff, and his presence was pretty noticeable even if he was out of sight, I didn’t think she had too much to worry about on that score. ‘It opens up a number of opportunities.’

‘Does it?’ I asked, unable for the life of me to see what she was driving at.

She nodded again. ‘It does,’ she confirmed, as though I’d grasped whatever she was blethering about, and tacitly agreed to it. ‘With the right consort beside me, my father is bound to confirm me as his heir. Viridia will need strong leadership once the mess there has been cleaned up, and I mean to provide it.’

‘Well, good for you,’ I said, trying not to smile as I finally grasped the real reason she’d manoeuvred her way aboard our ship of fools. She was positioning herself to fend off any rival claimants to the throne, and wanted to prove she’d go to any lengths to protect her home world. And if she could bag herself a Space Marine to marry along the way, so much the better: the idea was quite ludicrous, of course, but somehow quite charming in its naivety.<sup>79</sup> ‘I can’t think of a safer pair of hands.’

‘I was hoping you’d say that,’ Mira replied, smiling at me in a way I hadn’t seen for a long time. I returned it in kind, reflecting that this augured well for the subsequent progress of the evening, and I’m bound to say that I was far from disappointed.



## FOURTEEN

I didn't have long to enjoy the sudden change in Mira's demeanour, although she certainly became more pleasant company after that. It was almost like reliving the earliest period of our association back on Viridia, and although I couldn't help wondering now and again just what lay behind it, particularly on the occasions I noticed her staring at me like a kroot at some choice piece of carrion, for the most part I was simply grateful for the improvement. So marked was it, in fact, that I was taken by surprise when a momentary flash of her old petulance surfaced one morning, just after Jurgen had knocked on the door of my quarters to inform me that Gries had requested my presence on the bridge at my earliest convenience.

'Do you really have to go rushing off like a lackey every time someone sends you a message?' she asked, as I scrambled into my uniform, considered the state of my cap, which, despite Jurgen's best efforts, was still looking the worse for wear, and decided it would just have to do. 'He said at your convenience, not right this minute.'

'It's the same thing,' I told her, tilting it to hide the worst of the damage and checking the effect in the mirror. 'You might be able to keep people waiting as long as you like, but I can't. That was just a polite way of phrasing an order.' Deciding I was now as presentable as I was ever going to be, I turned back, to find her expression softening again.

'That won't be the case for ever,' she said, and I smiled back, touched by her evident faith in the upward trajectory of my future career. (Which has indeed left me in a position to keep people waiting as long as I care to, and

has done for some decades now, although the realities of my job mean that it's still generally impolitic to indulge the impulse.)

'I'll be back as soon as I can,' I promised, and left as briskly as protocol demanded. It was pointless asking if she wanted to accompany me; even if she could be persuaded to get moving, which with Mira was always problematic at best, the summons had been for me alone. It was entirely possible that a separate message had been dispatched to her own quarters, of course, in the interest of diplomacy, but she was so unlikely to respond that it wouldn't have surprised me to learn that Gries had simply given up even the pretence of attempting to include her in whatever decisions needed to be made.

'Commissar.' The Space Marine captain nodded an affable greeting to me as I strode onto the bridge, before returning his attention to the shipmaster, with whom he was in animated conversation about matters which meant nothing to me.

If I'd had any lingering doubts about what I was doing here they were dispelled almost at once, as my eye fell on Yaffel and Drumon, who were standing by the hololith, examining the star chart with every sign of satisfaction. I ambled over to join them, and the Techmarine glanced up as I approached.

'Commissar,' he said, standing aside to allow me an unimpeded view of the display. 'Just in time.'

'So I see,' I replied, taking in the familiar star chart in a single glance. One of the three systems Yaffel had pointed out at our previous meeting was illuminated more brightly than any of the others, and the green funnel had shrunk again, to leave the icon apparently stuck in its narrowing throat. I nodded an acknowledgement to Yaffel. 'Congratulations, magos. It seems your calculations were as reliable as ever.'

'By the grace of the Omnissiah,' the tech-priest agreed, contriving to project an impression of smugness despite the monotone in which the words were delivered, and the impassive expression generally considered appropriate to one of his calling. 'We've detected another weakness in the interface between realities, consistent with those we recorded earlier in the voyage.'

'Which should put us about here,' Drumon added, prodding at the icon I'd already noticed with his servo-arm. 'The Serendipita System. Within the usual margins of error, of course.'

‘Of course.’ I nodded, to show I was paying attention, and tried not to reflect that predicting an emergence point from within the warp was always little more than an exercise in wishful thinking; although our Navigator had proven remarkably able in that regard, which no doubt accounted for the fact that he or she had been engaged by a Space Marine vessel in the first place.<sup>80</sup> Then something else struck me. ‘We’ve always emerged blind before. How can you be so sure this is the system we’re coming out in?’

I should have known better, of course, and spent most of the next ten minutes nodding politely while Yaffel sprayed technical terms around, and wondering if his augmetic enhancements really had left him without the need to inhale, or whether it simply sounded like that to my reeling eardrums. Eventually he ground to a halt.

‘Something of an oversimplification,’ Drumon observed sardonically, ‘but accurate in its essentials.’ Then, apparently to ensure I realised he was joking, he added, ‘It seems the most likely candidate, given the flow of the currents our ship has been following.’

‘I see,’ I said, wondering why Yaffel couldn’t have been equally succinct. ‘Is it an Imperial system?’

‘Absolutely Imperial,’ Drumon assured me, with one of the faint smiles I’d grown more adept at noticing since we’d become sparring partners. ‘One primary world, seven others supporting settlements, and thirty-eight void stations. Two of which are starports with dockyard facilities.’ Which clearly accounted for his buoyant mood. I began to feel a sense of growing disquiet.

‘That implies a sizeable population,’ I pointed out. ‘Which means it’s the perfect place for the ’stealers to spread their taint.’

‘Quite so,’ Gries agreed, turning to look in our direction, and reminding me once again of the phenomenal hearing with which the Emperor had seen fit to endow him. ‘You can rest assured we’ll be prepared for any acts of treachery.’

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ I replied, though I felt a lot less easy than I tried to sound. We’d been ambushed almost as soon as we’d arrived in the Viridia System, and although the *Revenant* had shrugged off the attack easily enough, Drumon had made it abundantly clear that she was in no fit state to go into battle again. And Viridia had probably been infected by no more than a handful of implanted hosts; if the entire brood aboard the *Spawn of Damnation* had been roused, and able to rampage through the population

virtually unchecked, the Serendipita System could already be lost to humanity. If that were the case, as my increasingly pessimistic imaginings were halfway to convincing me, then it would be like our arrival in the orkhold all over again.

So, as you'll readily appreciate, as we all turned to the pict screen which relayed an image of the universe outside the hull, the lingering nausea of our transition to the materium was the least of my worries.

In the event, I must confess, I found it something of an anticlimax. Instead of the marauding warships I'd steeled myself to expect, there was nothing to be seen in any direction but the reassuring glow of the stars. None of the pinpricks of light appeared to be moving, which came as a further relief; if they had, they could only be vessels of some kind. Of course, the auspex operator had far more sophisticated senses to rely on than my eyes, and a moment later he confirmed my immediate impression.

'All clear,' he reported, in the same clipped monotone the whole ship's crew appeared to affect while on duty. 'Commencing detailed scan.'

'How far out are we?' I asked. My paranoia was as acute as ever, leaving me convinced that the system was going to turn out to be another firewasp nest sooner or later, and I wanted to be sure we'd have plenty of warning if trouble came looking for us. None of the speckled lights seemed any brighter than the others, but I was a seasoned enough traveller not to find that strange: at the kind of distances starships usually entered and left the warp, the local sun would be so far away as to appear no larger than any other star in the firmament.

'A little beyond the main bulk of the halo,' Drumon said, a thoughtful expression crossing his face, as he no doubt reached the same conclusion I just had. Innumerable pieces of cosmic flotsam would be clogging our auspex receptors, which meant an attacking flotilla would be all but undetectable at a distance – at least if they had the sense to power down and coast, igniting their engines only for the final attack run.

'That seems a bit far,' I said, determined to seem at ease despite the apprehension gnawing away at me. Starships would usually shoulder their way back into the real galaxy as close to a system's primary as they dared, to minimise the amount of time required to coast in to their destination; something I'd come to appreciate on the long, slow journey Jurgen and I had made from the halo to Perlia aboard a saviour pod.

Yaffel didn't actually shrug, but he contrived to give a passable impression

of having done so as he leaned across the hololith table, oscillating slightly in his usual fashion. ‘The hulk is drifting randomly, and we simply followed it through to the materium at the point from which it emerged,’ he pointed out, in the manner of one of my old schola tutors wearily explaining the blindingly obvious to an indifferent cadre of progeni for about the thousandth time in his career. (A sensation I’m beginning to sympathise with, now I’m the one trying to get the young pups to pay attention.)

‘Which might mean it hasn’t been in-system long enough for the genestealers to infect anyone,’ I said, feeling the first faint stirrings of hope since our arrival. Yaffel looked at me blankly, so I went on to explain. ‘All those ork ships were clustered around the last emergence point, weren’t they?’

The tech-priest nodded. ‘I suppose so. What of it?’

‘It must mean the *Spawn* was there just before we were,’ I pointed out, conscious of the irony of the sudden reversal of our positions. ‘A flotilla that size couldn’t have been mobilised to intercept us that quickly. Those ships must have been going after the hulk, and arrived too late – just in time to target us as we emerged from the warp in its wake.’

‘A sound inference,’ Gries agreed, and Drumon nodded.

‘Which means we should be concentrating our search efforts in this area.’ He manipulated the controls of the hololith, muttering incantations under his breath, then hit the display three times with the heel of his hand to stabilise the image. The long-familiar starfield disappeared, to be replaced by a simulation of the stellar system we’d arrived in. A scattering of crimson dots picked out the Imperial population centres, confined for the most part to the moons of the largest gas giant, while a single gold rune marked the position of the *Revenant*. A three-dimensional grid fanned out in front of it, reaching almost halfway to the sun in the middle of the display.

Yaffel studied it for a moment, then nodded. ‘I concur. If the commissar’s deduction is correct, which seems extremely likely, the probability of finding the *Spawn of Damnation* within the demarcated volume is approximately ninety-nine point two seven per cent.’

‘I’m pleased to hear it,’ I said, moving aside to make room for Gries, who, like all Astartes, required a considerable amount of space to stand in. I liked the sound of that a great deal more than the tech-priest’s last set of sums. Even more cheering, from my point of view, was the fact that the gas giant



and its attendant cluster of icons was on the far side of the sun, way beyond the area of space Drumon had picked out, and even the closest outpost of civilisation<sup>81</sup> was well outside its boundaries. It was still possible that a scavenger vessel of some kind had stumbled across the hulk, of course, as had appeared to be the case on Viridia, but even that worst-case contingency could be contained if we were quick enough. Despite a lifetime's experience that such feelings were merely the prelude to the discovery of a hitherto unsuspected greater threat, I found myself smiling confidently. 'It seems things are going our way at last.'

Despite the persistent little voice at the back of my head which continued to insist that things could only be going this well to lull us into a false sense of security, I must confess I found myself beginning to relax over the next few days. The search for our quarry was as painstaking and time-consuming as on every previous occasion, with the obvious exception of the time we were being distracted by orks – the sheer amount of debris in Serendipita's halo was hampering our auspexes just as much as I'd expected it to do. This time, however, I had something productive to get on with, and threw myself into the work with an enthusiasm which surprised me a little.

We had, of course, transmitted the news of our arrival to Serendipita,<sup>82</sup> and the presence of a Space Marine vessel within their borders had created about as much excitement as you might expect, especially once the coin dropped, and the upper echelons of the System Defence Fleet realised that our mission meant a clear and present danger to their home world. Accordingly, a delegation of local worthies had been dispatched to meet us; and since diplomacy was hardly Gries's strong point, I'd found myself called upon to liaise with them in his stead.

To my faint surprise, however, Mira didn't seem to share my enthusiasm for this development, seeming, if anything, positively put out by it. 'I don't see why you have to do all their work for them,' she said, echoes of the pettishness I remembered all too vividly colouring her voice for the first time in weeks.

I shrugged, and sipped my tanna while she tore a chunk out of a freshly buttered florn cake with her teeth and masticated it savagely. We were enjoying what I sincerely hoped was about to become a rare quiet interlude, before the heavy shuttle bearing the Reclaimers' latest guests arrived, and I felt it best to keep the peace if I could. 'I don't really have a choice,' I

pointed out reasonably, transferring one from the salver to my plate while I still had the chance, and topping it with a spoonful of ackenberry preserve. I'd had ample opportunity to observe that Mira's consumption of foodstuffs gained momentum in direct proportion to how affronted she felt, and experience inclined me to safeguard my own provender. 'My orders were to liaise between the Reclaimers and the Imperial Guard, and since there's a Guard garrison on Serendipita, I'd be derelict in my duty if I hadn't contacted them at the earliest opportunity.' And thereby laid the groundwork for my passage back to Coronus, as soon as I could detach myself from this increasingly pointless assignment, although no one needed to know that just yet.

'I can see that,' Mira conceded, with a conciliatory tilt of the head and a faint spray of crumbs. 'I just don't see why you have to waste your time with the rest of them.'

'I'd rather not,' I told her truthfully. 'But they're all arriving together. Splitting them up isn't really an option.'

'No.' She shook her head, and I began to realise she probably understood the situation better than I did: after all, she'd grown up surrounded by competing factions jockeying for position, all needing to be kept working together for the common good. 'It'd create too much division, and if we're going to keep the genestealers from overrunning Serendipita, we all need to be singing from the same psalter.'

'You'd make a good commissar,' I said, only half-joking, and she smiled at me across the table.

'You'd make a good regent,' she said. Then she turned her head, the smile sliding from her face, as the familiar odour of my aide thickened the room, followed a moment later by its source. 'I told you we weren't to be disturbed.'

'Pardon the intrusion, sir,' Jurgen said, addressing me directly, with the exaggeratedly formal tones he tended to employ while sticking rigidly to protocol in the faces of irate officers, then turning his head slightly to add a perfunctory 'miss,' before returning his attention entirely to me. 'Captain Gries would like you to join him at the ventral docking port. The diplomatic shuttle from Serendipita's due in about ten minutes.'

'Thank you, Jurgen,' I said. 'Please convey my respects to the captain. I'll meet you down there in a moment.'

'Very good, sir.' He saluted, no doubt to underline that this was military

business which superseded whatever Mira might think about his unexpected arrival, and marched out in a vaguely martial slouch.

I turned back to Mira, whose expression now looked about as warm as a Valhallan winter, and whatever quip I'd been about to make to lighten the mood scurried back to the safety of my synapses unvoiced. 'Are you serious?' she asked, in incredulous tones. 'What in the name of the Throne do you want that malodorous halfwit with you for?'

'Because he's my aide,' I pointed out, with a little more asperity than I'd intended. 'Protocol demands it. And he diverts attention from me.' Which meant I could size up the new arrivals while they were nicely distracted, instead of being gawped at like a sideshow mutant because of my ridiculous reputation.

'I can believe that,' Mira conceded, and the frost in her tone began to thaw. She rose and began to make her way towards the door. 'I'd better leave you to your preparations.'

'I'm pretty much prepared already,' I admitted, picking up my much abused cap and sticking it on my head without further thought. I'd given up trying to position it to minimise the damage, and if any of the Serendipitans didn't like the look of it, they'd just have to lump it.

To my surprise, Mira turned back, reached up and adjusted the position slightly, then regarded the effect with a faint smile. 'That's better,' she said. 'Makes you look dangerous, rather than just knocked about a bit.'

I glanced at the mirror to see what she'd done, and found myself staring at the reflection of a hard bitten warrior who'd borrowed my face. 'Thank you,' I said, astonished by the transformation. 'How did you do that?'

Mira smiled, all trace of her previous bad mood gone. 'It's not what you wear,' she said, 'it's the way you wear it. Every woman knows that.' Then she turned and resumed her progress towards the door. 'Now if you'll excuse me, I need to take my own advice. See you in the docking bay.'

'You're going too?' I asked, and her smile spread.

'You said it yourself,' she told me. 'Protocol demands it.'

The hangar bays used by the Thunderhawks were all positioned on the flanks of the ship, where they could best be covered by the broadside batteries when deploying under fire, so this was my first sight of the ventral docks protruding from the *Revenant's* keel. There were two bays in all, set back to back and separated by heavy blast doors, which Drumon told me

could be retracted to combine the two chambers if required. I had no idea when this was likely to be, having seen no sign of anything the size of an Imperial Guard drop-ship in service with the Space Marines, but was happy to take his word for it.<sup>83</sup> I suppose if I'd cared I could have asked him for more detail, but he was engaged in conversation with Gries and his bodyguards for most of the wait, and it wouldn't have been polite to interrupt.

At any event, both bays were accessed from open space by the usual arrangement of airtight doors, thick enough to be rammed by a Chimera without taking a dent, which closed off the end opposite the bulkhead separating them. From the observation gallery running along one side of both, and protected from decompression by a handwidth of armourcrys, it was pretty obvious which one was soon to receive our guests: the mighty portal had been cranked open, revealing the star-speckled velvet of eternal night beyond, while the other chamber was still sealed and pressurised.

'Impressive,' Mira commented quietly in my ear, her perfume beginning to displace the earthier scent of Jurgen, and I started, having remained unaware of her approach.

'Very,' I agreed, turning to look at her. 'Every millimetre the diplomat.' To my unexpressed relief she'd dispensed with the joygirl outfit, replacing it with a formal gown of indigo hue, which was echoed by the soft slippers she'd employed to sneak up on me. But then, I suppose, matching her appearance to the occasion was a skill she'd grown up with, not unlike my own talent for dissembling.

'I'm glad you approve,' she said, with every appearance of sincerity. 'Have I missed much?'

I shook my head. 'Not yet,' I assured her, with a nod towards the vacant hangar bay. Something was clearly going on down there though, void-suited Chapter serfs scurrying about on the deck plates, so the arrival of the shuttle was undoubtedly imminent. A fresh burst of movement caught my eye, and I nodded. 'Oh, nice touch.'

Gries and the other Astartes were entering the chamber through an airlock almost directly below us, and beginning to take up their positions, ready to greet the new arrivals, completely untroubled by the lack of anything to breathe down there. The impression made on the delegates, watching through the viewports of their transport while the chamber pressurised, would undoubtedly be a strong one, reinforcing the air of superhuman

invulnerability Space Marines tended to project as a matter of course.

‘He’s more of a diplomat than he thinks,’ Mira agreed, as the shuttle finally appeared in the rectangle of star-spattered darkness, and coasted inside as silently as a nocturnal raptor swooping on a rodent. It was larger than I’d expected, closer in size to a bulk cargo lifter than the Aquila I’d anticipated, and I began to realise that perhaps Gries had had the right idea in keeping as far away from its passengers as possible.

‘Looks like a bit of a crowd,’ Jurgen observed, and I nodded, calculating rapidly. You could have fitted a platoon inside it quite comfortably, along with their Chimeras, but if I was any judge a vessel that extensively ornamented would have been designed with its passengers’ comfort a far higher priority than the efficient use of space. Even allowing for individual staterooms and a fairly commodious common area, there would still be room for a couple of dozen at least.

‘About thirty, I would think,’ Mira said, and it suddenly dawned on me that she was probably a great deal more familiar with this type of vessel than anyone else on board. She pointed to a detailed mosaic of thermal tiles wrapped around the blunt nose of the ship. ‘That’s the governor’s personal heraldry, so we can expect that whoever’s on board has a fair bit of pull.’

‘Wouldn’t we have been informed if the governor was coming?’ I asked, and Mira shrugged, which I always found agreeably diverting.

‘Not necessarily,’ she said, ‘but I doubt it. He’s probably running round in little circles back on Serendipita, making sure any obvious signs of corruption or misgovernment are tidied away before the Adeptus Astartes arrive.’ Then she smiled, in a self-deprecating fashion which quite suited her. ‘It’s what I’d do.’

‘But he put his personal shuttle at the disposal of the delegation,’ I said. ‘How very generous of him.’

Mira smiled again, either at my apparent naivety, or the thinly veiled sarcasm. ‘Generosity has nothing to do with it,’ she said. ‘It shows he’s taking the Reclaimers seriously, and willing to get involved, but keeps him conveniently distanced from any decisions made here which might cause trouble at home.’ Her voice held a faintly admiring edge. ‘He plays the game well.’

‘Let’s hope you get the chance to tell him that, before the genestealers eat his system out from the inside,’ I said. We were certainly off to a good start, but my innate pessimism, forged in the crucible of far too many unpleasant

surprises just when we thought we'd got on top of things, was refusing to let go of the conviction that the situation was hardly likely to remain as straightforward as it had been.

Jurgen nodded. 'Doesn't do to turn your back on them,' he said, no doubt mindful of our experiences on Keffia.

'I don't imagine we'll be doing that,' Mira said.

'Certainly not,' I agreed. A chill mist was beginning to drift against the armourcrys by now, as the thickening atmosphere in the docking bay was chilled to the temperature of space, and a barely perceptible thrumming was growing audible, as the air became dense enough to transmit the sound of the pumps feeding it into the cavernous chamber. I began to lead the way towards the staircase leading down to the airlock. 'Our first priority has to be assessing the threat, and the best way to combat it with the assets we have in-system.' I'd timed it nicely, the outer doors of the airlock grinding open to admit the diminishing howl of the shuttle's engines,<sup>84</sup> as the pilot powered them down.

'Commissar. Commendably prompt,' Gries rumbled, as the boarding ramp began to descend. If he was surprised to see Mira with me, his helmet hid it, and he acknowledged her presence with a simple 'Envoy.'

'Captain,' she responded, with a perfunctory curtsy. 'Whose company are we to expect the pleasure of?'

Pleasure wasn't exactly the thing I was anticipating, I must admit. I wanted to talk to the real soldiers among the delegation, which basically meant the Imperial Guard officers, along with the PDF and SDF representatives for their local knowledge. I was already certain that the vast majority would turn out to be Administratum drones and members of the local aristocracy instead, though, keener to boost their position by association with the Astartes than to make any meaningful contribution to the defence of the system.

Gries evidently felt much the same way, judging by the curtness of his reply. 'Ommissiah knows,' he said. 'Or how many of them will have something relevant to say.'

'Then if I may make a suggestion,' Mira said brightly, 'perhaps Ciaphas should just liaise between you and the military people, like he's supposed to, while I keep the hangers-on out of the way. I've nothing practical to contribute to the strategic planning in any case, but I do know how to talk to politicians without yawning.'

‘That would be helpful,’ Gries agreed, and I nodded, concealing my surprise as best I could.

‘It would indeed,’ I concurred, wondering what would be in it for her, and deciding that right now I didn’t really care. The important thing was to stop Serendipita from going the way of her home world, and too many others along the Eastern Arm for comfort.

‘Good.’ Mira smiled at me. ‘Then let’s try to look as though they’re all welcome, shall we?’

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



*Editorial Note:*

*As usual, though he mentions a few of the astrographic details in passing, Cain is vague at best about conditions in the Serendipita System. Accordingly, I've inserted the following extract here, in the hope that it may make things a little clearer.*

From *Interesting Places and Tedious People: A Wanderer's Waybook*, by Jerval Sekara, 145.M39.

Serendipita is well named, for it does indeed come as a delightful surprise to the warp-weary traveller; a small constellation of habitable worlds, though, it must be said, with varying degrees of comfort, orbiting a single gas giant of quite prodigious size. So large, indeed, that it radiates light and warmth in the manner of a small star,<sup>85</sup> rendering its half-dozen planet-sized moons tolerable for the hardy folk who make their homes here. The most favoured of these is Serendipita itself, which enjoys a temperate climate, abundant oceans and two small polar caps. Rendered the capital world of the system by virtue of supporting the bulk of its population, and having been the first orb settled by humanity, it's a pleasant enough sphere to tempt even the most jaded wayfarer into lingering for a while.

Should its charms pall, however, the other moons of this singular primary are also worth visiting, with the exception of Tarwen, the industrial centre of this curious conglomeration of worlds. Tarwen is as aesthetically unpleasing as its inhabitants, who, like their home, are grimy and dour, and the best that can be said for the place is that its existence allows Serendipita



itself to remain charmingly unspoilt, save for those little comforts of civilisation which only seem important when unobtainable. In a similar fashion, much of the agriculture supporting the far-flung population is relegated to other moons, although Serendipita does boast some tolerably picturesque rural hinterlands serving her larger cities.

It should be noted in passing that other centres of population exist in the wider stellar system, but contain nothing of interest, being devoted entirely to mining, commerce or other such occupations of the artisan class, while a remarkable number of ne'er-do-wells continually ply the magnificent ring system and innumerable lesser moons around Serendipita in search of exploitable resources and other plunder; not the least of which are the ramshackle vessels generally employed in this pursuit, and which come to grief about as often as one might expect given the inordinate number of hazards to navigation in so thick a belt of debris. From the surface of the habitable worlds, however, the ring is most notable for the breathtaking spectacle it affords to those seeking diversion after nightfall.



## FIFTEEN

Over the next few days, I must confess, I had good reason to be thankful for Mira's intervention. The delegation had proven to be every bit as overrun with time-serving bureaucrats, Emperor-bothering ecclesiarchs and inbred imbeciles from the local aristocracy as I'd feared, far too many of whom wanted their pics taken with honest-to-Emperor Space Marines, the Hero of Perlia, or both, to keep my temper in check without the considerable exertion of willpower. Fortunately, the prospect of having to ingratiate themselves with Jurgen in order to gain access to me deterred all but the most persistent, and the few who persevered had no more luck getting past him than anyone else I didn't want to see; but it couldn't be denied that Mira was doing an excellent job of keeping the majority occupied, and I was duly grateful. Quite what she did with them I had no idea, and cared even less, but it was bound to have fewer repercussions than my favoured option of shoving the lot of them out of the nearest airlock and leaving them to walk home.

At any event, her willingness to suffer fools gladly, or at least to tolerate them without giving way to the impulse to violence, left the way clear for me to assess the threat with the aid of General Torven, the overall C-in-C<sup>86</sup> of the Guard units garrisoning the system against the possibility of an attack by the orks we'd run into on our way here, Planetary Marshal Kregeen, his opposite number in the local PDF (who, to my relieved surprise, seemed both to take her responsibilities seriously, and understand them, neither of which could normally be relied on when, as here, the senior command staff

of the local standing army was drawn from the ranks of the local aristocracy), and Admiral Duque, whose stewardship of the SDF fleet may have lacked the swashbuckling panache of a Horatio Bugler,<sup>87</sup> but seemed solidly competent at least. All of them had brought aides, adjutants and advisors with them, of course, but the ones who sat in on the meetings generally had the good sense to keep quiet unless they had something useful to contribute, and I must say we made pretty good progress between us. Gries was, of course, far too busy directing the hunt for the space hulk to participate himself, but that was the whole point of my liaison job, and I made sure he had a cogent summary of our deliberations at the end of every session.

The good news was that we seemed to be pretty well prepared to counter the genestealers if they were foolish enough to show their hand (or talons, to be a little more accurate) openly. The existing threat of the orks meant that Serendipita was in a constant state of vigilance anyway, and everyone present had been involved in seeing off a raid or two in recent years. I had no doubt that the Serendipitans, and their Guard allies, were more than capable of holding their own against even a full-scale incursion, but the more insidious long-term threat posed by 'stealer infiltration required more subtle counter-insurgency measures which simply hadn't seemed necessary up until now.

'We've got a couple of regiments with that kind of experience,' Torven said, one of which turned out to have acquired theirs on Keffia, which was a considerable bonus. 'They can take point on this, and bring the others up to speed.' As always, he spoke quietly, but with the deliberate emphasis of someone who didn't need to raise his voice to be sure he was being listened to – an assumption which, given his wealth of experience in the field against the enemies of the Emperor, he was perfectly entitled to make. His appearance was as unassuming as his voice; despite his rank he still dressed for the field, in fatigues and body armour, although few of the men under his command would have either which fitted so well, or were kept so scrupulously clean. Unsurprisingly, he was popular with the common troopers, who regarded him as one of their own; and he'd certainly done his time in the field, if the burn scar which still marked the left side of his face (the result of a nearby plasma burst, if I was any judge) and the worn condition of his pistol grip was anything to go by.

'My people could benefit from some instruction in that area too,' Kregeen

added, 'if we could arrange to liaise on that.' She was astute enough to know that the PDF were regarded as something of a joke by the Guard contingent, but never acknowledged it, always speaking to Torven as an equal; and he was sensible enough not to resent it, or show the fact if he did. Despite betraying her aristocratic lineage by sporting a dress uniform even Mira might have regarded as a little over-ornamented, she paid close attention to our deliberations, and such interjections as she made were always cogent. Now she rested her elbows on the table, supporting her chin on her hands, and looked at the general as though she'd requested nothing more significant than a fresh mug of recaf.

'That would be prudent,' Torven agreed, and two sets of aides peeled away from the table, to go into a huddle in one corner of the conference room which had been set aside for our use. Given that the long table and the padded benches were a comfortable size, instead of being scaled for the more massive frame of the Space Marines, I assumed that some of the crew were even now cursing us quietly for the disruption to their regular messing arrangements – an impression strengthened by a stain in the grain of the tabletop not far from where I was sitting, which looked uncannily like gravy.

Kregeen nodded, meeting the general's light brown eyes with her own, which were the same flinty grey as her hair. Although she presumably had the same access to juvenat treatments as anyone else of her status, she'd evidently chosen to fix her biological age at around the mid-forties, as a visible reminder of the significance of her office. 'I'll open some channels with the Arbites as well,' she said. 'I'm sure they'll have some useful advice about what to look for.'

'That sounds like a good idea,' I agreed. Like most civilised worlds, Serendipita had a small staff of resident arbitrators to oversee the local law enforcers, and I'd been vaguely surprised not to find one of them included in the delegation.<sup>88</sup> 'They've had more practice at rooting out clandestine activity than anyone else, so if a 'stealer cult does get established, they're almost certain to be the first to know.'

'If they know what they're looking for in the first place,' Torven added.

I nodded. 'Good point. Perhaps you could use the marshal's contacts to make sure they get the benefit of your Keffian veterans' experience.' Not a desperately subtle way of making sure the Guard and the PDF were working together, rather than following their natural inclinations to ignore

one another as much as possible, but it seemed to do the job: Torven and Kregeen both nodded, a pair of aides next to them made eye contact and brief entries on their data-slates, and we were onto the next item for discussion.

‘It’s all well and prudent,’ Duque said, having listened to the exchange without commenting, ‘to be prepared to fight the genestealers if we have to, but surely it would be far more sensible to eliminate the threat entirely before things get to that point.’ He had the pale complexion and ectomorphic build of a void-born, and no doubt felt more comfortable aboard a vessel in space than on the surface of a world, which was quite ironic given the unusual degree of choice his home system offered in that regard.

‘It would,’ I agreed, ‘if that were possible. Do you have any suggestions as to how we go about achieving it?’

The admiral nodded, his pale face bobbing above a midnight-blue uniform which seemed even darker than it actually was by contrast. ‘I do,’ he assured me, with quiet confidence. He gestured to one of his staff, a junior lieutenant who bore a faint resemblance to him, a niece or a cousin perhaps, and took the data-slate she proffered. ‘Given the progress of the search so far, we can assume that the *Spawn of Damnation* will be located within the week, and most probably a great deal sooner.’ He consulted the display, then glanced around the table. ‘I’ve already given orders for the majority of our System Defence Fleet to rendezvous with the *Revenant*, in the expectation that by the time they arrive, the hulk will have been found.’

‘Well done.’ Kregeen was nodding in approval. ‘If we can keep it blockaded, nothing will be able to get on or off. All we’ll have to do is wait for it to fall back into the warp, and blast anything which gets too close or tries to leave in the meantime.’

‘Blockaded?’ Duque looked surprised for a moment, then smiled, in what looked to me like honest amusement. ‘You misunderstand me, madam marshal. I intend to destroy it.’

‘With respect, admiral,’ I said, ‘I think you may be underestimating the sheer size of the thing. I’m given to understand that previous encounters recorded its mass as being on the order of a small planetoid, rather than a spacecraft as we’d normally understand the term.’

‘Quite so.’ The pale man didn’t seem too put out at the interruption. ‘But we’ll have plenty of time to shoot at it. If the estimates the *Astartes* have

given us are accurate, it will be at least a month before the *Spawn* passes close enough to any human habitation to pose a threat. We can reduce it a piece at a time if we have to, but reduce it we will.'

'Won't that create an even greater danger?' Torven asked, looking troubled. 'That amount of debris will pose a significant hazard to navigation throughout the system.'

'Not for long,' Duque assured him. 'The *Spawn of Damnation* is currently heading almost directly for the centre, and will end up falling into a cometary orbit about the sun within the next two to three years. It won't take much to time the attacks to nudge it a little, so that the bulk of the debris will pass close enough to be vaporised. Some of it will escape, of course, but that won't be passing close to Serendipita, or any of the other habs, on this orbit, and by the time it comes round again it'll be the middle of M43; time enough, I would have thought, to take any reasonable precautions against it hitting something.'

'It sounds a bit chancy,' I said, 'but I'd rather have a cloud of junk to deal with than a space hulk full of 'stealers.' After all, there was no telling how long it might take for the *Spawn* to drop back into the warp again; according to Yaffel they sometimes stayed in the real galaxy for decades, and the thought of thousands of genestealers drifting around a densely inhabited system, just waiting for some idiot whose greed was stronger than their sense of self-preservation to come dropping in looking for loot, made my blood run cold. After all, that's what appeared to have happened on Viridia, and the blasted hulk had only been in-system for less than a day. Duque's SDF could mount a blockade, of course, but the longer it went on, the higher the chances of a 'stealer or two somehow managing to infect a host and sneaking off to wreak havoc.'

I nodded judiciously. 'In the absence of a more effective plan to preserve the security of the Serendipita system, I'll recommend we carry it out.'

'Out of the question,' Gries said flatly. By now I'd got to know him well enough to realise a statement like that was effectively the end of the matter, but I have to admit I was taken aback by the speed and vehemence of his reaction.

Accordingly, I merely nodded in response, masking my dismay with the instinctive ease of a man who'd bet heavily on an inordinate number of promising-looking tarot hands in his time, only to realise shortly afterwards

that everyone else's were better. (A reflex which had enabled me to scoop rather more pots than I'd otherwise have been entitled to, nevertheless.) 'Might I ask why?' I enquired, as though the answer were merely of academic interest. I couldn't deny that Duque's scheme was chancy, to say the least, but it still seemed to me that the balance of risk was marginally in its favour.

'Because the *Spawn*'s value is incalculable,' Drumon put in, glancing across the bridge towards the hololith, where Yaffel and a cadre of his red-robed acolytes were twittering away to one another in Binary, as they studied a three-dimensional image of what looked to me like the circulatory system of a diseased heart. 'A space hulk that venerable is a repository of archeotech almost beyond imagining.'

With a sudden sinking feeling, I realised that the diagram the tech-priests were studying so intently must be a schematic of the hulk's interior, no doubt reconstructed from generations of sensor scans culled from the archives, and therefore so out of date as to be worse than useless.<sup>89</sup> 'Don't tell me you're planning to board it?' I protested, too startled to give a frak for protocol.

'We are,' Gries said, in a voice which brooked no argument. It's probably a measure of how startled I was that I tried arguing anyway.

'The potential rewards may well be worth the risk,' I conceded, secure in the knowledge that someone else would be taking it, and determined to at least be diplomatic about my reservations, 'but surely our highest priority has to be the security of Serendipita?'

Clearly, Gries wasn't used to having his decisions called into question, at least by anyone outside his own Chapter,<sup>90</sup> but fortunately he seemed willing to make an exception in my case. If anything he seemed surprised, rather than irked, which was fine by me; my sparring sessions with Drumon had left me well aware of the speed and precision with which an angry Space Marine could strike down anyone provoking their wrath, and I had no desire to provide a bit of practice.

'Our highest priority is our duty to the Emperor,' Gries told me, looking down to meet my eyes, and I saw in his the kind of complete and utter conviction that I'm more used to seeing in madmen, inquisitors and members of the Adepta Sororitas.<sup>91</sup> 'And I will determine where that lies.' He didn't have to add, 'and not you,' because I heard it quite clearly in any case.

‘Quite so,’ I agreed, inclining my head in a respectful nod. I wanted him to continue to think of me as a trustworthy ally, rather than a potential problem. ‘Given your wealth of knowledge and experience, I wouldn’t have thought otherwise for a moment. But I’m afraid it’s my job to keep the Serendipitans on side, and the only thing they seem concerned about is the clear and present danger to their home world.’

‘Of course.’ Gries nodded, apparently mollified. ‘Then you must assure them we remain committed to that objective.’

‘I’ll make them see sense,’ I promised, although to be honest that was something which seemed in very short supply aboard the *Revenant* at the moment. Gries and Drumon seemed to be buying it anyway, looking down at me in a faintly approving fashion which reminded me of my old schola tutors when I parroted the answer I knew they wanted to hear. ‘Blockading the hulk seems a rather more practical option in any case.’

‘Considerably more,’ Drumon agreed. ‘And the presence of an Adeptus Astartes strike cruiser should dissuade anyone from trying to run it.’

‘It would me,’ I agreed. ‘But I’m not a scav barge skipper who thinks the Emperor just dropped a fortune in his lap. Anyone stupid enough to risk boarding a hulk full of genestealers isn’t going to be put off by the near certainty of being blown to bits on the way in.’

For a moment, as my brain caught up with my tongue, I wondered if I’d risked offending my hosts again, but apparently neither Astartes thought my remark about the idiocy of attempting to board the *Spawn of Damnation* applied to them. But just to make sure, I thought I’d better draw a distinction. ‘I’m sure your operation over there will be rather better planned and resourced than a scavvy raid,<sup>92</sup> however.’

‘Indeed,’ Gries said, nodding again. Then, to my surprise, he strode to the hololith, scattering tech-priests as he went, and gestured to me to follow him.

I looked at the tangle of passageways laid out by the faintly flickering three-dimensional image, my underhiver’s instinct translating the intersecting streaks of variously coloured light into an almost physical sense of the space they represented. (Something I was to be all too grateful for later, as it turned out, but which at the time seemed no more than a convenient aid to interpreting the briefing.)

‘Our first entry point will be here,’ Drumon said, indicating a chamber somewhere on the outer skin of the complex weave of ducts and corridors.



‘A relatively undamaged docking bay, which seems large enough to accommodate a Thunderhawk, and defensible enough to provide a beachhead. The Terminators will suppress any resistance and secure the perimeter. Once that’s been done, Magos Yaffel and myself will lead a working party here...’

He did something with his servo-arm which caused the image to zoom in on the sector he’d first indicated, separating the beachhead and the objective by almost a metre instead of just the millimetre or two they’d occupied of the overall schematic. As the area depicted enlarged, so did the detail, and a further tangle of intersecting capillaries grew around the veins and arteries we were already looking at, leaving the whole hololith just as crowded as it had been before. For the first time I began to appreciate just how vast and complex the leviathan of the warp we were pursuing really was, and wished the boarders every bit of luck the Emperor could spare; I was certain they were going to need it.

‘...and attempt to recover the cogitator core of this vessel,’ Drumon concluded.

‘Why that one?’ I asked.

‘Because it has the most directly accessible cogitator banks of any of the derelicts making up the hulk,’ Gries said, as though that should have been obvious from a cursory glance at the pile of virtual string hovering in front of my face.

‘And because it’s been tentatively identified as a Redeemer-class vessel, none of which have been in service for over five thousand years,’ Yaffel put in, positively salivating at the prospect. ‘The maintenance logs alone should yield untold blessings of the Omnissiah which have been lost to posterity.’

‘A prize indeed,’ I said evenly, which was far more tactful than verbalising my real thoughts would have been. It seemed to me that if the galaxy had been getting along perfectly well without these lost blessings for the last five millennia in any case, losing the ’stealers along with them would have been better all round. But it wasn’t my call, so that was that. I’d just have to break it to Duque that he wouldn’t be able to knock any lumps off the hulk, at least for the time being, and ride out the ensuing recrimination. Come to that, Torven and Kregeen would be far from thrilled too. At least I had Gries to blame, and I’d been a commissar for long enough to know how to use their common resentment to get them cooperating a bit more effectively than they otherwise would have done, so all in all, things could have been

worse. Then something else occurred to me. ‘This is probably a stupid question,’ I asked, ‘but what happens if the *Spawn* falls back into the warp while your sca... retrieval expedition is still aboard it?’

Yaffel gave me a faintly superior look, like an eldar deigning to notice one of the lesser breeds of the galaxy (which they consider to be everyone except them). ‘That can’t happen,’ he said, with an airy confidence which left me far from convinced.

Drumon nodded. ‘The hulk is coasting in towards the sun,’ he reminded me. ‘And natural warp fissures can only occur outside a gravity well. Even a starship with a properly focussed Geller field can only force its way between the realms on the fringes of a system.’

‘So it’s stuck here until it drifts out past the halo again,’ I said, grateful as always for his pared-down summary of the situation.

Magos and Techmarine nodded in unison, apparently equally delighted at the prospect. They’d have years to poke around in the wreckage for technosorcerous trinkets, with nothing more to worry about than Emperor knew how many ravenous genestealers lurking in the dark.

Which also meant that, far from coming to a close as I’d expected, my assignment here looked like being prolonged indefinitely. Someone would have to liaise between the Reclaimers, the Serendipitans and the Imperial Guard, and, for better or worse, I’d been stuck with the job.

I considered the implications. It wouldn’t be too hard to convince everyone that the best place to work from would be Torven’s HQ on Serendipita, where I’d have ready access to system-wide intelligence, the PDF and SDF command structures, and, most importantly, all the little comforts available on a civilised world, instead of being stuck aboard a starship where the chances of finding a decent tarot game were about as high as Jurgen becoming the next lord general. And while I was getting on with looking busy, I’d be a long way from brigade headquarters on Coronus, along with anyone intent on roping me in to whatever suicide mission they happened to have to hand. All in all, I thought, I could live with that.

I returned to my quarters in a distinctly cheerful mood, to find Mira waiting for me while Jurgen laid out a tolerably pleasant supper, and lost no time in sharing the good news with her. She’d have found out anyway, soon enough, and I felt it prudent to be the one to tell her. That way, whatever else she might take exception to, at least I couldn’t be accused of deceit.

Despite whatever forebodings I may have harboured, however, she seemed almost as pleased at the prospect as I was, which I suppose shouldn't have come as that much of a surprise. She'd clearly found life aboard the *Revenant* even more tedious than I had, and would no doubt seize the chance to relocate to more salubrious surroundings with equal alacrity.

'In fact,' she said, a forkful of smoked salma from her hoard of delicacies halfway to her mouth, 'I suppose my little errand here is pretty much over too.'

'I suppose so,' I agreed, taking a mouthful of my own and washing it down with an inoffensive vintage I strongly suspected was the best the Space Marine vessel had to offer. 'The hulk definitely isn't going to present any kind of threat to Viridia from now on.' When it eventually did drift back into the warp, I had no doubt that the Reclaimers and the Adeptus Mechanicus would go right along with it, as reluctant to let it go as a kroot with a bone; and their eagerness to carry on looting the hulk wherever it ended up would prevent it from posing a threat to any Imperial system it happened to arrive in, which was all to the good.

Mira smiled, as though I'd just said something witty. 'Quite,' she agreed. 'But I did have other motives for coming along, you'll recall.'

'Of course,' I said, dredging my memory. Something about strengthening her claim to the throne back home, and finding a consort able to help her grab it. 'I'm glad they seem to be working out for you too.' She seemed to have given up on the ridiculous idea of persuading a Space Marine to elope with her, and for a moment I wondered who else she'd found who looked like a suitable candidate. One of the Serendipitan delegation, presumably – they can't all have been as pointless as they looked.

Her smile spread. 'For both of us, surely.'

'Well, yes,' I agreed. It wouldn't take much to turn my liaison job into a sinecure guaranteed to keep me comfortably out of harm's way for years to come, which was pretty much as good as it ever got for someone in my position. I raised my goblet, in a slightly ironic toast. 'Here's to both of us getting what we want.'

'To both of us,' Mira said, her glass clinking against mine, and I found myself genuinely wishing her well, which for someone as focussed on my own concerns as I usually was, came as a bit of a surprise. Her cheeks coloured slightly, and as she lowered her drink, she looked at me in a manner I found a little odd. 'Are you sure about this?'

‘Of course I am,’ I said, touched by her concern. The sooner I could feel a world beneath my feet again the better.

‘Good.’ She became businesslike again. ‘Serendipita doesn’t do much trade with us, but there’s a Charter ship or two linking the systems, with only a couple of intermediate layovers. We should be able to get passage within a few months.’ She looked at me speculatively. ‘Unless you’ve got some strings you can pull? We might as well use them while we can.’

‘While we can?’ I echoed, feeling oddly like a character in a ballroom farce.<sup>93</sup> Her words were undeniably Gothic, but the meaning behind them kept eluding me.

Mira nodded. ‘While you still have some influence with the Munitorum,’ she elucidated, as though that made perfect sense. ‘Could you get us berths on a military ship?’

‘I suppose so,’ I said, falling back on the card player’s instinct which generally helped me out at moments like this. Time and again I’ve found that if you appear to understand what’s going on, and don’t panic, sooner or later you’ll get a clue. Everything will fall into place, and no one will ever know you were out of your depth. It’s an important skill for a commissar, too, come to think of it, as we’re supposed to look calm and in control whatever happens. It’s remarkably difficult to rally troops under fire when you’re dithering about screaming ‘Frak, oh frak, we’re all going to die!’ So I nodded judiciously, as though she’d just asked a perfectly reasonable question. ‘If you wanted to hurry back, of course.’

‘Good point,’ she rejoined, smiling at me again, in a manner I can only describe as curiously cloying. ‘Let’s enjoy ourselves for a few weeks while we can. Serendipita’s quite a pleasant world, apparently.’

‘Something to do with the ring system, I suppose,’ I said, having picked up a little bit about conditions there from Torven and the others. ‘I hear it’s quite spectacular.’

‘Then you’ve talked me into it.’ Mira’s smile became coquettish. ‘We might as well enjoy the honeymoon before we have to get down to work.’

‘Exactly,’ I heard my mouth say, the pieces finally dropping into place, and our earlier conversation taking on an entirely new meaning which had escaped me at the time. She hadn’t been out to bag herself an Adeptus Astartes at all. The Liberator of Perlia would do perfectly well as a consort, particularly as I seemed to be a hero on Viridia as well.

A chill prickle of panic chased itself down my spine. I can’t deny that, in

the abstract, the notion of continuing to enjoy Mira's more obvious charms indefinitely, along with the material comforts formalising our relationship would provide, had its appeal, but the idea was utterly preposterous. The Commissariat wasn't like one of the confection-box regiments<sup>94</sup> my would-be fiancée and her aristocratic cronies amused themselves by playing at officers in, which would cheerfully accept a resigned commission whenever more pressing or diverting business presented itself. If I abandoned my assignment to return to Viridia with her I'd be branded a deserter, and the only question left open about my future would be whether the ensuing tribunal had me shot by a firing squad, or packed me off to a penal legion to let the enemies of the Emperor save them the ammo. No doubt Mira believed that being the consort of a planetary governor would be sufficient protection from the wrath of my erstwhile colleagues, but I was under no such illusion: once you put on the scarlet sash, it's there till they bury you in it (assuming they can find enough bits for the ceremony, which in our vocation is never entirely certain). Even if you make it through to retirement intact, you can still be yanked back into the field pretty much on a whim, as I've found out only too well these last few years.<sup>95</sup>

Even so, I hesitated before speaking. Mira was clearly under the impression that I'd not only divined her purpose, but somehow signalled my agreement to her absurd proposal. I knew only too well how she was likely to react to being disabused. I'd seen the lurking virago erupt from behind the refined facade over matters so minor they'd barely registered with me, and now I was about to take a chainsword to her most cherished ambitions. Worse still, of course, would be the blow to her vanity. Most women like to think they're irresistible, and discovering that she wasn't wouldn't sit well at all. Add to that the fact that I'd seen her kill people without turning an immaculately groomed hair, and my wariness becomes even more understandable.

All this being so, it can come as little surprise to hear that I remained paralysed by indecision, nodding and responding with automatic platitudes, while Mira prattled on about her grandiose plans for Viridia once we'd consolidated her grip on it, most of which seemed to consist of score-settling with people I'd never heard of. Whether I would eventually have found the courage to speak out, or just jumped on the first transport ship back to Coronus while her back was turned, I'll never know, however. I was just on the point of pouring myself the largest amasec I thought I could get

away with, when Jurgen returned to my quarters, his face composed in the faintly dyspeptic expression he tended to adopt whenever he felt an air of gravitas was required.

‘Sorry to interrupt your meal, sir,’ he said, ‘but your presence is requested on the bridge. They seem to think they’ve found it.’

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## SIXTEEN

Seizing gratefully on my aide's timely intervention, I lost no time in hurrying to the bridge, leaving Mira happily planning her *coup d'état*<sup>96</sup> with all the enthusiasm most women of her rank reserve for cotillions. Though my mind continued to reel with the shock of the realisation of what I'd blundered into, I must confess that the bustle of activity which met my eyes the moment I entered the nerve centre of the *Revenant* was almost sufficient to drive it out entirely.

'Contact confirmed,' the auspex operator was saying as I stepped through the doors, which were still showing faint traces of orkish small-arms fire despite the best efforts of the shipboard artisans to restore the devotional images adorning them, and the air of expectation suffusing the chamber became so dense I almost had to resort to hacking through it with my chainsword. 'It's definitely a hard return,<sup>97</sup> refined metals by the signature.' For the first time I heard a tremor of suppressed excitement in the even tones I'd grown used to hearing from the Chapter serfs manning the bridge, and, despite my own concerns, felt an answering flicker of it within myself.

If this truly was the end of our quest, it could hardly have come at a more propitious time. It meant I'd be on my way to Serendipita almost immediately, and once I was there, I'd be able to avoid Mira far more effectively than I possibly could in the cramped confines of the *Revenant*. A faint flicker of optimism even dared to raise the hope that, once we were back on *terra firma*, and she was again immersed in her own social environment, she'd begin to see the huge gulf between our respective

milieux for what it was, and abandon the absurd project she'd conceived of her own volition. (Not that it seemed particularly likely. When she made her mind up about something, she pursued it as tenaciously as a gaunt scenting blood.) It was possible, however, that I could get off the ship before she noticed I was gone, citing orders and duty, which would at least buy me a breathing space.

'Could it just be a vessel?' Gries asked, leaning forwards a little, as though he could force the pict screen to greater magnification purely by willpower. 'The SDF flotilla should be nearing the rendezvous point by now.'

'Unlikely,' Drumon told him. 'None of the System Defence boats would be that far out of position.' He loomed over the auspex operator and made some minute adjustments to the dials set into the surface of the control lectern, pinching them delicately between the fingers of his gauntlets, like an ogryn trying to pick up a porcelain tea bowl. 'Displacement reads in the gigatonnes.'

'Then it's the *Spawn*,' Yaffel said, sounding rather more excited than was strictly commensurate with his position. He wasn't exactly hopping up and down, which would have been difficult given his lack of legs, but he was definitely oscillating more violently than usual. 'It's the only reasonable inference.'

'And right where you predicted it would be,' I reminded him, which wasn't exactly true, as he'd only been able to narrow it down to a pretty wide volume of space, but he didn't seem inclined to quibble about it, merely nodding sagely in agreement.

'The Omnissiah leads us down the path of logic to a sure destination,'<sup>98</sup> he said, with the comfortable certainty of a man for whom the universe not only ran like clockwork, but chimed the first few bars of 'Throne Eternal' on the hour.

'Boosting the gain on the long-range imagifers,' Drumon said, doing something I couldn't see to the back of a nearby lectern with his servo-arm, and Yaffel trundled over to the hololith, where he began to poke around in turn.

'Then if the interociters hold together,' the tech-priest added, 'we should be able to... Omnissiah be praised.' The three-dimensional display flickered into life, and the image of what looked like a jagged piece of scrap metal began to tumble gently within it, growing larger with every passing minute, until it filled the space almost entirely. It wavered a bit, as such



representations generally do, but Yaffel seemed to know what he was about, and with a few muttered benedictions, some fiddling with the controls, and a well-placed thump of his fist, he steadied the image.

‘*The Spawn of Damnation*,’ Drumon said, his voice remarkably hushed for a Space Marine. Gries nodded, apparently too overcome to speak at all, and his battered half-face relaxed into an expression I found hard to interpret, but had certainly never seen there before.

I studied the image, seeing nothing that made much sense at first. I was aware of the scale of the thing intellectually, of course, but it wasn’t until I suddenly recognised a small blemish on the surface as a Galaxy-class troopship that something of the awe clearly felt by everyone else present transmitted itself to me. ‘Throne on Earth,’ I found myself saying. ‘It’s vast!’

Even that involuntary exclamation barely began to cover the sheer size of the hulk. It was big the way a small moon is, beyond any sense of scale a human can grasp or relate to.<sup>99</sup> Despite knowing the effort was pointless, I began to try to pick out more details, but any attempt to impose order or understanding on the tangled lump of wreckage was doomed to failure. Even trying to estimate the number of vessels which had fallen victim to this reef of space, only to become part of it in their turn, was impossible; at least for me, although I was sure Yaffel would have been able to take a shot at it. Drawn together by eddies in the warp currents, their physical structures had become combined and mingled, twisted around and within one another as they collided, rather than shattering and fragmenting as they would have done in the materium. It was as if a vast hand had scooped up a random selection of starships, and kneaded them together like a pastrycook with a fistful of dough. And it wasn’t just ships: I was sure that here and there I could make out the harsher lines of pieces of natural debris, rocks and asteroids, drawn in by the gravitational field of the hulk during its periodic transitions through realspace, to become inextricable parts of it in the crucible of the warp.

The worst thing about it, however, was the sense of menace it radiated, an almost palpable threat, like the snarling of an ork just before it charges.

‘Where are you planning to board it?’ I asked Yaffel, and he indicated a semi-intact hull about three-quarters of the way round the lump from the wreck of the Galaxy I’d previously recognised.

‘The docking bay here,’ he told me, and I was orientated at last, my

underhiver's synapses instinctively overlaying the internal structure I'd seen before on the exterior view. 'The sensor records we recovered from the archives are some centuries old, of course, but they seem to indicate that it could be made functional again with little effort.'

'So long as a 'stealer brood hasn't set up home there in the interim,' I said, not entirely sure how serious I was being.

'We'll take precautions,' Yaffel assured me, sounding blithely unconcerned; but I'd seen purestrains up close too often, and too recently, to dismiss the threat they represented so casually.

'Then you'd better hope to the Throne they're sufficient,' I counselled, perhaps a little more sharply than I'd intended. It may have been this which drew Drumon to join us, or perhaps he just wanted a better view of the space hulk. At any event he was suddenly at my side, looming over me like a well-disposed promontory.

'They will be,' he promised. 'By the time we get over there, we will know where the bulk of the brood is.' His demeanour was calm, and despite the improbability of his claim, I found myself reassured. After all, he was one of the Emperor's chosen, and he'd probably been facing 'stealers or worse since my great-grandfather was tracking bounties in the sump (or trying to outrun the would-be collectors of his own, most likely),<sup>100</sup> so he ought to know what he was doing.

'How soon will that be?' I asked, conscious of my responsibilities to Torven and the others. If I was going to make a good case for transferring my liaison post to the Imperial Guard headquarters on Serendipita, I'd better have some juicy titbits to throw to them.

Drumon considered the question a moment. 'Around twelve hours,' he said. 'The cats should have dispersed enough to locate any active genestealers by that point.'

'Cats?' I echoed, baffled. Plenty of Guard regiments use animals for one purpose or another on the battlefield, generally as cavalry mounts or attack beasts, but I'd never heard of Astartes doing so; and even if they did, felines would hardly seem the most likely creatures to give a genestealer a run for its money.

'See ay tee,' Yaffel elucidated, no doubt divining my confusion. 'Cyber-Altered Task units. Like very simple servitors, without the biological components.'

'Then how do they work?' I asked, even more puzzled than before. I might

not have been a tech-priest, but even I knew it was the living brain which allowed a servitor to remember and process simple instructions.

‘Quite satisfactorily,’ Drumon said, with a momentary smile at his own wit, before continuing. ‘They require no cognitive functions; just a simple vox circuit to relay picts and other environmental data. Once released, they just keep moving in a straight line until they reach an obstacle.’

‘Of which,’ I said, equally dryly, ‘I suspect the *Spawn of Damnation* has more than its share.’

‘Undoubtedly,’ Yaffel agreed, apparently as constitutionally incapable of recognising sarcasm as the majority of those in his vocation. ‘But the CATs have a simple mechanism attached to their tracks. When they reach an obstruction they can’t negotiate, they simply rotate ten degrees on the spot, before moving forwards again. If they’re still impeded, they repeat the process, and so on. Eventually they find a direction they can progress in.’

‘They sound ingenious,’ I said, wondering which of them had come up with the idea, and suspecting it was probably Drumon; the devices Yaffel was describing seemed to fit his practical turn of mind rather better than the tech-priest’s analytical one.<sup>101</sup>

‘They should serve their purpose,’ Drumon agreed. ‘We plan to teleport thirty of them across to the hulk, around the area we intend operating in. If there are enough genestealers around to pose a threat, we’ll know about it long before the Thunderhawk arrives.’

‘That sounds like a wise precaution,’ I agreed, nodding judiciously. If I’d been going off to loot a derelict, knowing there was a ‘stealer brood lurking somewhere aboard, I’d feel a lot happier knowing where they were too – or, at least, that they weren’t in the immediate vicinity of where I planned to be. ‘Can you stick a bolter on them as well?’

Yaffel shook his head, failing to recognise the joke. ‘That wouldn’t be a practical option,’ he began. ‘The power-to-weight ratio—’

‘Pity,’ I said, little realising how prescient I was being. ‘That might save everyone a lot of trouble.’

As I’d anticipated, Torven and the Serendipitans were less than enthused by the tidings I bore, and the atmosphere around the makeshift conference table was distinctly frosty by the time I concluded my briefing. It was plain that all three of them shared my misgivings about the wisdom of boarding the *Spawn of Damnation*, and, as I’d expected, it was Duque who first put

them into words.

‘So what you’re telling us,’ he said slowly, ‘is that not only are we prevented from destroying the thing by the presence of friendly units in the target zone, we can expect the genestealers to be handed a potential vector of contamination on a platter with a salad garnish?’

‘Essentially, yes,’ I told him, noting the restive fashion in which Torven and Kregeen shifted their weight on the benches as I did so. ‘But I’m sure our gallant allies in the Adeptus Astartes will take all due precautions.’ Not for the first time, I found myself treading a delicate path between the conflicting agendas of the Reclaimers and the defenders of Serendipita. If I was going to turn this assignment into a comfortable refuge from a galaxy apparently hell-bent on killing me, I needed to keep both factions feeling I was more in sympathy with their point of view than the other.

‘No doubt,’ Kregeen said, in a voice which oozed dubiety.

‘They should know what they’re doing,’ Torven said. ‘They’re Astartes after all. It’s the cogboys that worry me. They seem so obsessed with the prospect of getting their hands on a stash of archeotech, they’re incapable of assessing the risk objectively.’

I couldn’t argue with that, and I didn’t have the heart to tell him that so far as I could see the Reclaimers were equally keen to go dashing off on a treasure hunt, so I simply nodded judiciously. ‘They believe they can, of course, but I’ve yet to meet a ’stealer that’ll back down and run away if you tell it its presence is a statistical fluke.’ That lightened the mood, of course, as I’d hoped it would, as well as reminding them that I’d faced and fought the creatures on more than one occasion, and I followed up the advantage with a little careful morale-boosting. ‘At least if anyone does fall prey to them, the damage ought to be self-limiting,’ I added. ‘Space Marines and Mechanicus tend not to go in for large families.’

This time the witticism produced visible smiles, even from some of the aides, who generally seemed to feel that their chances of promotion depended on behaving as much like servitors as possible without a lobotomy.

‘Quite so,’ Torven agreed evenly. ‘But the bulk of the *Revenant*’s crew are ordinary men. If any of them should become tainted, and make their way to Serendipita, they’ll start spawning hybrids almost at once.’

This was true, of course, and I nodded reassuringly. ‘Then it’s fortunate that only Space Marines and members of the Adeptus Mechanicus will be

included in the boarding party. None of the Chapter serfs will be exposed.'

'Not initially,' Torven said. 'But you said it yourself, they intend to continue exploring the hulk for as long as it remains in the materium. That could be anything up to a decade, and a lot can happen in that amount of time.'

'And what happens if one of the Space Marines does get implanted?' Kregeen asked. 'They don't have to father children to act in the interest of the brood mind, do they?' For a moment the image of the tainted PDF troopers who'd turned against Mira and I in the tunnels beneath Fidelis rose up in my mind, and I tried not to contemplate the havoc a similarly compromised Space Marine could wreak. Not to mention the prospect of an implanted Thunderhawk pilot smuggling a few purestrains on board, to cut a swathe through the crew, thereby seeding the nucleus of another genestealer cult in the heart of Serendipitan society.

'No, they don't,' I agreed, my resolve to get as far away from the *Revenant* as quickly as possible even stronger than before. 'I'll raise the possibility with Captain Gries at the earliest opportunity and let you know what precautions he'll be taking against it.' If nothing else, he was a realist, and I was sure he had contingency plans in place, even if they were just the same as the ones we had in the Guard: summary execution and burn the body. (Which was in fact the case: when I did eventually get the chance to raise the subject he became as close to agitated as I ever saw him, which I found strangely reassuring. Clearly he regarded the notion of losing one of his own to the brood mind as abhorrent as any mortal commander would have done.<sup>102</sup>)

'That's all very well,' Duque said, 'but I'd rather take precautions of my own.' In the absence of a hololith, or pict screen large enough for us all to look at, he passed round a data-slate, on which a cluster of illuminated dots appeared, annotated with icons identifying them as the hulk, the *Revenant* and a dozen or so System Defence boats. 'I'm deploying the blockade in this pattern. Individual ships will rotate in and out, of course, according to operational requirements, refit and resupply, but the total number will never drop below this minimum.'

'It looks pretty tight,' I said, although my grasp of three-dimensional tactics was tenuous at best; one of the first things a good commissar (as opposed to the by-the-book martinets who'll execute a trooper at the drop of a hat, and like as not end up on the wrong end of a negligent discharge<sup>103</sup>)

learns is when to dispense a few words of quiet encouragement. 'But won't committing so many vessels to this operation leave you overstretched elsewhere in the system?'

'We'll manage,' Duque said. 'We won't have much of a strategic reserve left, admittedly, but we can still respond to a greenskin raid effectively enough if we have to. And the genestealers are here now, so that's where I'm putting my ships. If the worst happens, we can still keep them from causing any harm.'

'Well, let's hope you don't have to,' I said, taking his meaning and nodding almost imperceptibly to let him know I'd done so. He'd positioned his ships where they could combine their fire against the *Revenant* if the worst came to the worst, and enough of the Reclaimers and their vassals were taken over by the brood mind to seize control of the cruiser. If it ever came down to it, the fight would be a bloody one, but the SDF would almost certainly prevail by sheer weight of numbers. 'I take it everyone else has been considering the worst-case scenarios?'

Torven and Kregeen glanced at one another, then nodded in unison, and I was pleased to see that they appeared to be working together reasonably well on this. 'We have,' Torven confirmed. 'The marshal and I are agreed that the existing contingency plans against an orkish invasion will prove sufficient if required.' So it seemed we were as prepared as we could ever be to defend ourselves against a strike force of implanted Space Marines spearheading a genestealer swarm: another possibility I devoutly hoped would remain purely theoretical.

'The trouble is,' Kregeen said, 'we've got no real idea of the scale of the threat. Best case, the Space Marines and the Mechanicus really are as on top of things as they like to think, and we can let them get on with it knowing the admiral's blockade will be enough to do the job if they fumble. Worst case, it's all going to the warp in a sabretache, and we need to be ready to mobilise in a heartbeat.' She shrugged. 'So which is it?'

I adopted an expression intended to convey sober reflection. 'I don't suppose we'll know for sure until they've been over there,' I said, after pausing just long enough to give the impression I'd been mulling it over.

'Exactly,' Torven agreed. He leaned across the table towards me, as though about to impart a confidence he'd rather not have overheard. 'Which is why we'd all feel a lot happier if there was an objective observer attached to the boarding party.'

Duque and Kregeen nodded their agreement, and with a sudden thrill of horror uncannily reminiscent of my conversation with Mira, I realised what they were driving at. Nevertheless, I nodded again, as if I was seriously considering it.

‘I could ask Captain Gries to let me tag along,’ I said, which was perfectly true, I could; but I had about as much intention of doing so as going back to the orkhold to challenge the local warboss to an arm-wrestling match. ‘How he’d feel about it, though...’ I shrugged, to show I had no idea. Hardly a subtle piece of misdirection, I’m sure you’ll agree, but it did the job. Everyone relaxed visibly, and although no one went so far as to pat me on the back, I was left in no doubt that a warm welcome awaited me on Serendipita.

‘We couldn’t ask for more,’ Torven said.

I smiled, playing up to my reputation for modest heroism, as though being asked to take an insanely dangerous risk was merely routine (which, come to think of it, it more or less was by this point in my career), and glanced around the table. ‘Then perhaps I’ll have some more news for you when we meet on Serendipita,’ I said. Whatever happened, this would be our last meeting aboard the *Revenant*: it seemed the parasites Mira had been herding had had enough of the Reclaimers’ hospitality by now, a sentiment which I was certain was heartily reciprocated, or perhaps the governor just wanted his shuttle back. At any event, the delegation was due to depart the following day, and the military personnel along with it. (Apart from Duque and his people, who were hopping over to his flagship aboard an *Aquila* it had dispatched for the purpose, and which was rather pointedly timed to arrive several hours before the boarding party set off for the *Spawn*.)

Of course, despite the impression I’d gone some way to foster, I hadn’t the slightest intention of attaching myself to what I was convinced was little more than a suicide mission. But, once again, I’d reckoned without Mira.

I’d taken the precaution of voxing Jurgen before leaving the conference room, to ensure that my quarters were currently free of my self-appointed helpmeet, so I must admit to feeling a little cheated by fate when she popped out of a cross corridor close to the guest quarters as abruptly as a villain in a mystery play.<sup>104</sup> Seeing her in the flesh again, aesthetically pleasing as it was, disconcerted me considerably, and the dilemma I’d managed to push to the back of my mind under the pressure of more recent



events came flooding back, seemingly as intractable as ever.

‘Ciaphas.’ She smiled, evidently still in a good mood and apparently pleased to see me. ‘This is a pleasant surprise.’

‘I could say the same,’ I returned, donning a smile of my own and wondering if I’d be able to head off the inevitable confrontation for a while longer, or whether I should simply get it over with as quickly as possible. I carried on walking in the direction of my stateroom while I spoke, in the vague hope that she had urgent business elsewhere, or that at least if it all went plover-shaped she’d be less inclined to try to kill me with Jurgen in earshot. To my distinct lack of surprise she fell in beside me, chattering brightly as she undulated along the corridor.

‘I’ve just had some excellent news,’ she informed me, and despite the faint itching in my palms which these words provoked, I nodded, as if I couldn’t wait to hear the details.

‘Good,’ I said, not entirely inaccurately. ‘I could do with some.’

Mira smiled, looking for a moment as if I’d just complimented her on her finger painting. ‘I’ve been talking to the seneschal,’ she said brightly, as if I knew or cared which of the inbred drones among the delegation she meant, ‘and he said not all the military people are going back to Serendipita on the shuttle tomorrow.’

‘That’s right,’ I said, wondering how some gretch-frotting civilian had found out about this, while making a mental note to remind everyone in the SDF party what ‘need to know’ meant, and put the fear of the Throne into them until it stuck. ‘Duque and his people are joining the blockade.’<sup>105</sup>

‘Oh, you knew.’ She looked faintly disappointed, as if I’d guessed the punchline of a joke she was telling before she’d reached it. Then she brightened again. ‘So you know what that means, right?’

‘A little more leg room for the others?’ I hazarded, although from what I remembered of the shuttle’s arrival, that didn’t seem much of a consideration.

Mira smiled at me, unsure whether I was joking, or genuinely didn’t get it. Correctly divining the latter, she grinned more widely. ‘Room for more passengers,’ she said. When I still didn’t jump around punching the air, she amplified further. ‘Us.’

Emperor help me, she was serious. I stopped moving and stared at her in perplexity.

‘Mira, I can’t just up and leave on a whim.’ The first thunderclouds started



to gather over her perfectly groomed eyebrows, which were moving together over deepening frown lines, and I carried on as though I'd always meant to, hoping to head them off. Now it was looking like a distinct possibility, I decided I really couldn't deal with a confrontation today. 'However much I'd like to, I have duties and responsibilities to consider. There are just too many people here counting on me to do my job.'

'Do they mean more to you than I do?' she asked, and I could hear the first rumble of the approaching storm, like distant artillery, in her voice.

'What I want doesn't come into it,' I said. That had been true, one way or another, from the first day I tied my sash, and lent verisimilitude to the rest of my words. 'What I'm doing now could be crucial to protecting Serendipita from the genestealers. If I could turn my back on that, would I really be the man you want beside you on Viridia?' To my relief, the first faint flicker of doubt was beginning to show on her face, as she began to think about it. I followed up the advantage. 'If I got on that shuttle with you now, you'd regret it. Maybe not today, or tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of your life. You'd never know if I was there for you, and the good of Viridia, or for my own selfish reasons.'

'I'd know,' she said confidently, but the flicker of doubt in her eyes told a different story.

'If I could go with you, I would,' I said, truthfully enough; I had precious little idea what a governor's consort was supposed to do, other than supply an heir or two, which I was confident I could manage given the amount of practice we'd had, but I was sure they got shot at rather less frequently than I was used to, and the food and accommodation were certainly far superior to anything the Imperial Guard had to offer. 'But I'm needed here. The boarding party's going across in the next few hours, and the Guard and the Serendipitans need my reports. The security of the entire system might depend on it.' I don't mind admitting I was laying it on with a trowel by now, but the results were undeniably satisfying: Mira was looking at me with a kind of awed respect I hadn't seen before, and which, I must confess, I rather liked.

'You're going over to the space hulk?' she asked, all trace of her incipient tantrum gone, and I nodded, milking the moment.

'I've been asked to, at any rate. I was just on my way to discuss it with Captain Gries when I ran into you.' Too late, I realised the trap my tongue had laid for me. Mira could no more keep a juicy morsel of gossip like that

to herself than she could give up breathing, and it was carrots to credits it would be all round the parasites she was herding before the hour was out. Which, in itself, didn't matter that much, except that Torven and Kregeen would be on the shuttle with them, so certain to hear all about it, and my chances of retaining their good opinion once they realised I'd been nowhere near the *Spawn* would be somewhere between slim and negligible.

'Then I'd better let you get on with things,' Mira said, disengaging from my arm as we arrived at the door to my quarters. As I opened it, Jurgen's distinctive aroma billowed out into the corridor, and she turned away quickly. 'Good luck.'

'Thank you,' I responded, stepping inside and hoping I wasn't going to need it.

'Are you all right, sir?' Jurgen asked, rearranging the grime on his face into an expression of puzzled concern. 'You look a bit peaky, if you don't mind me saying so.'

'I've felt better,' I admitted.

'I'll get some tanna on,' Jurgen said, slouching away in search of a kettle.

'Thank you,' I said. 'Then, if you wouldn't mind, can you arrange a meeting with Captain Gries?'

The situation wasn't entirely lost, I told myself, as the welcome scent of brewing tanna began to permeate the room. After all, he could always say no.



## SEVENTEEN

I should have known better, of course. Gries was all for it; he didn't go quite so far as to pat me on the back and say 'Wish I was going with you, bag a 'stealer or two for me,' but he probably would have done if that sort of thing hadn't been unseemly in an Astartes of his rank and seniority. As it was, he simply nodded, said 'That would be acceptable,' and got one of the Chapter serfs to scurry off and make the arrangements before I could think of a plausible excuse for changing my mind.

The only bright side to the whole sorry mess was that Mira was so impressed with my apparent heroism she insisted on spending the few remaining hours before my departure in a protracted and strenuous farewell, which came close to making my imminent demise seem almost worth it. As I trudged across the hangar floor to our waiting Thunderhawk, though, the prospect of taking a few happy memories to my grave with me did little to offset the leaden weight of dread now freighting my stomach.

'Commissar,' Drumon greeted me as I approached. 'Good news. The vox relays with the CATs are functioning well, in most cases, and there appears to be no genestealer activity in the vicinity of our landing point.'

'Excellent,' I said, trying to appear relaxed, enthusiastic and quietly confident, and probably failing dismally in every respect, before the full import of his words filtered through my trepidation. 'What does "in most cases" mean, exactly?'

'Three of them are failing to transmit any data,' Drumon expanded. 'We infer that they materialised too deeply inside the derelict for the vox signal

to reach through the hull.'

'Definitely not ripped apart by genestealers, then?' I asked, trying to sound as though I was joking.

'That seems most unlikely,' Yaffel assured me, scooting across to join us, and I found myself wondering how well he was going to fare if the *Spawn of Damnation* was as chewed up as wrecked ships usually seemed to be.<sup>106</sup>

Drumon nodded. 'If they were disabled by enemy action, they would have transmitted some data back before we lost the link,' he pointed out, and, somewhat reassured, I echoed the gesture.

'One did,' Yaffel said, with perfect timing, and my burgeoning confidence wilted again like a Tallarn salad. 'But I can confidently rule out aggression by a genestealer as the cause.'

'I'm delighted to hear it,' I said. 'And the reason for your confidence would be...?'

Yaffel quivered a little, although whether it was from suppressed indignation at my manifest scepticism, or the vibrations set up in the deck by the synchronised plodding towards the Thunderhawk of our Terminator escort, I couldn't rightly have said. 'The CAT in question was equipped with motion sensors,' he said. 'Nothing could have approached it within twenty metres without registering, and nothing did. So, unless you're aware of a genestealer capable of travelling in excess of ninety metres a second, in order to overwhelm the response time of the auspex to movement within its vicinity, simple mechanical failure seems far more likely.' He seemed genuinely put out by the admission, which I suppose was only to be expected, having noted on previous occasions how loath tech-priests generally were to admit that anything might go wrong with their precious contraptions.

'Stealers are hellish fast,' I agreed, 'but not that quick.' Another thought struck me, and I seized on it eagerly, seeing a last, faint hope of avoiding this ridiculous enterprise. 'I don't suppose any of your mechanical moggies were able to tell if there's anything fit to breathe over there?' The Reclaimers wouldn't care one way or the other, of course, and for all I knew everyone in the tech-priest contingent had been fitted with augmetic lungs, but I most definitely required something with a dollop of oxygen in it to keep me going. I'd tried breathing vacuum once before, and that was novelty enough for one lifetime.

'They were,' Drumon assured me. 'Both composition and pressure are

well within tolerable limits for an unmodified human.'

'Well, that's nice to know,' I said, as the air in my immediate vicinity became marginally less wholesome, announcing the arrival of my aide.

'Sorry to keep you waiting, sir,' Jurgen said, with a salute-like wave in the general direction of Drumon, a compromise he generally fell back on when unsure precisely where someone connected to the military stood in relation to his own somewhat nebulous position,<sup>107</sup> and a businesslike nod to Yaffel. 'I was preparing a flask and a few sandwiches, in case you got a bit peckish later on.'

'Thank you, Jurgen,' I said, and although it would have taken a lot more than a quick slurp of tanna to perk me up at that point, I felt my spirits beginning to revive nevertheless. As I've remarked before, his phlegmatic demeanour and apparently boundless confidence in my leadership, however misplaced, was curiously heartening. His lasgun was slung from one shoulder, in an apparently casual fashion which belied the speed with which he could reverse and use it, and, as ever, he seemed perfectly willing to follow me on this absurd escapade with no more thought for the risks involved than he would have employed on a foray into the kitchen in search of a snack.

His flak armour was partially obscured by a tangle of pouches and webbing, containing Emperor alone knew what (apart from a flask of tanna and some sandwiches, of course, although their precise location was anybody's guess), but by now we'd served together for so long that something would have seemed seriously amiss if he was prepared to venture into the field without it. 'Your timing's impeccable, as always.' Which wasn't exactly true, but no one else seemed quite ready to leave either.

'We might as well board,' Drumon said, leading the way up the ramp and into the bowels of the Thunderhawk. Seeing no further reason to delay, I followed suit, Jurgen trotting at my heels. Yaffel stayed where he was, hovering anxiously, while a couple of loading servitors with the Adeptus Mechanicus sigil proudly displayed on their tabards plodded towards the Thunderhawk bearing brass-bound boxes, for all the galaxy like an apprehensive habwife watching the family porcelain being heaved into a pantehnicon by carters. What they contained I had no idea, and cared even less, beyond inferring that they had something to do with the tech-priests' scavenging expedition.<sup>108</sup>

The interior of the passenger compartment seemed rather less commodious than I remembered, around a dozen Terminators taking up quite a lot of room,<sup>109</sup> but we found seats with little difficulty – and this time I made sure that I got hold of a headset before strapping in. The seat Drumon had steered me to, before settling into his own, between the looming bulk of the Terminators and the red-robed tech-priests twittering away to one another in Binary, had a clear line of sight to a nearby viewport, through which I watched Yaffel directing the stowage of the last of his baggage before scooting up the ramp to join us.

No sooner had he done so than the boom of the closing hatch, felt rather than heard over the rising racket of the engines, echoed through my bones, and the suffocating sense of apprehension I'd fought so hard to dispel swept over me once more. Like it or not, I was committed, about to set foot aboard a warp-spawned deathtrap, and however devoutly I might wish it, there could be no turning back.

I don't suppose the short hop from the strike cruiser to the *Spawn of Damnation* took more than a handful of minutes,<sup>110</sup> but it seemed an eternity to me, my apprehension growing with every passing second. To distract myself, I flicked through the frequencies the headset could pick up, but none of the conversations I overheard made much sense: the Mechanicus contingent seemed content to continue warbling at one another in their own private language, the Terminators were absorbed in one of the pre-battle litanies peculiar to their Chapter and Drumon seemed to be meditating, no doubt praying to the Omnissiah to provide a sufficiently juicy stash of archeotech to make the absurd risk we were running worth taking. Since Jurgen was never exactly a sparkling conversationalist at the best of times, I was effectively thrown back on my own company, with nothing to occupy my mind apart from the ominous view through the panel of armourcrys facing me.

Until our Thunderhawk left the docking bay, I'd had no idea how close to the space hulk the *Revenant* had moved; but almost as soon as the sturdy gunship moved out of the shadow of the hangar doors, the vast derelict was filling the viewport, like a misshapen metal asteroid. As our pilot boosted us away, on a parabolic trajectory towards the shattered hull of the Redeemer-class vessel somewhere on the far side of the vast conglomeration of scrap, the strike cruiser shrank rapidly, diminished by

distance, while the dimensions of the space hulk seemed largely unchanged. I found myself reminded of the tiny fish that accompany oceanic leviathans,<sup>111</sup> then, rather less comfortably, of the lesser bioforms which swarm about the massive bulk of a tyrannid hive ship.

Though I tried to pick out some of the more identifiable features I remembered from the hololithic image Drumon and Yaffel had shown me, the effort was futile. I'd seen spacecraft from the outside before, of course, but in every case their hulls had been limned by a myriad of light sources, from the huge luminators guiding shuttle pilots into the hangar bays to the sputtering sparks of the welding torches in the hands of the void-suited tech-adepts pottering about on the hull, not to mention the warm, welcoming glow seeping from uncountable viewports. The immense bulk of the *Spawn of Damnation* was utterly dark, however, as bleak and inhospitable as the void itself, so that despite its size and solidity it seemed an insubstantial phantom, appearing only as a hole of greater darkness against the glittering backdrop of the stars.

After a few moments the glowering shadow had expanded to encompass the entire viewport, and I felt an overpowering sense of vertigo, as though we were falling down an infinite abyss ripped into the fabric of the universe. I gripped the armrests tightly and listened to the hammering of my heart, which for a moment or two seemed to drown out the perpetual howl of the Thunderhawk's engine.<sup>112</sup> It was only at this point, perhaps because we were so close by now, that I finally began to pick out patterns in the darkness, deeper shadows which spoke of fissures in the accretion of detritus below us, and the faint gleam of reflected starlight striking highlights from peaks and promontories in the horizon of twisted metal.

'Magnificent!' Yaffel breathed, apparently in all sincerity, and I found myself reflecting that there was never a heavy object around to throw when you really needed one.

'Let's hope you still think that when you've got a pack of genestealers snapping at your heels,' I said, momentarily forgetting that he didn't have any, and with a touch more asperity than politeness and protocol would normally have allowed.

'Our Terminators should be able to keep them at arm's length, at least,' Drumon commented wryly, rousing himself from his trance in time to forestall whatever riposte the tech-priest might have been about to make.

'Bolter range would be better,' I said, inflecting it like a pleasantry, and

nodding to convey my gratitude to him for helping to smooth over a potentially awkward moment.

‘Better for some,’ the nearest Terminator put in, raising a hand to display the fearsome claws I’d last seen ripping apart an artillery piece. His helmet swivelled in my direction, the voice issuing from it imbued with the calmness which comes from unshakable confidence. ‘Arm’s length suits me.’

‘I’m pleased to hear it,’ I replied politely. ‘In my experience, the one thing you can say for genestealers is that there are always enough to go around.’

‘Well said,’ the sergeant I’d last seen in the ruins of Fidelis put in. ‘If they turn up, we’ll be ready.’

‘They’re not going to turn up,’ Yaffel said, with an edge to his voice which might have been irritation if tech-priests hadn’t been supposed to be above such things. ‘The corridors around the beachhead are completely free of the creatures. None of the CATs has registered any movement.’

‘Then where the frak are they?’ I asked, not unreasonably.

‘In hibernation, probably,’ Yaffel said. ‘If there are any left alive at all.’ Though he wasn’t exactly built for shrugging, he made a creditable effort, which his shoulder harness effectively neutralised. ‘We’re only inferring their presence, after all, from the infiltration of Viridia. It’s possible the infestation came from another source entirely.’

‘Possible,’ Drumon conceded, ‘but hardly probable.’

‘Be that as it may,’ Yaffel said, effectively conceding the argument, probably because if he did bother to work out the odds as he usually did it would have demolished his own position,<sup>113</sup> ‘there’s no reason to suppose that there was ever more than a handful of the creatures on board.’

‘Can I have that in writing?’ I asked, once again allowing something of the agitation I felt to imbue the words with rather more testiness than I’d intended. ‘If there really are ’stealers aboard the hulk it’s because the tyranids put them there, and they never bother with just a handful of anything when a few hundred will do.’ As it turned out, even that was a woeful underestimate, but as I was still in blissful ignorance of that particular fact, my initial guess worried me more than enough to be going on with.

Any further debate was cut short by a few uncomfortable moments as the engines fired again, and the Thunderhawk pitched abruptly, its nose coming up as the pilot aligned it with whatever was left of the old Redeemer’s



docking bay. Then the gunship's external floodlights came on, throwing the wilderness of metal outside into clear visibility, and an audible gasp rose from the little coterie of tech-priests, despite most of them no doubt feeling such blatant displays of emotion were a trifle *infra dig* in the normal course of events.

Not that I could blame them for that. In its own way, the metallic landscape was quite awe-inspiring, though undeniably bleak. It spread out below us, filling the viewport to the jagged horizon, a wasteland of bent and buckled hull plates, sheared structural members and what looked to me uncomfortably like the wreck of a utility craft of a similar size to our Thunderhawk. Whatever it was had impacted too quickly for much to remain identifiable, but there was a wrongness about the proportions of the pieces of tangled wreckage which made me suspect it had been of xenos manufacture. Before I could draw Drumon's attention to it and ask his opinion, however, it had passed out of sight, and our descent had become even more precipitous.

Having been through more docking runs than I could count, even in those days, I gripped the armrests of my chair just as the pilot rolled us vertiginously around, the on-board gravity field fluctuating uncomfortably for a second or two as it synchronised with the local one and established a subtly different direction for down. Now, instead of descending, we appeared to be approaching a solid wall of fissured metal, and, despite knowing intellectually that our pilot was more than competent, I tensed involuntarily for an impact my hindbrain insisted was about to come.

It didn't, of course. No sooner had Jurgen's muttered imprecation about the flight crew's parentage faded into the echoes around us than the exterior of the derelict disappeared, to be replaced by the walls of a docking bay.

'This appears to still be functional,' Yaffel said, his tone adding an unspoken 'I told you so.'

'It does indeed,' Drumon agreed, 'but appearances are often deceptive.'

'Quite so,' Yaffel agreed. 'But we should be able to get the doors closed and the chamber pressurised without too much difficulty.' The hull-mounted luminators were reflecting brightly back from walls of age-dulled metal, their buttresses more slender and finely wrought than those I was used to seeing aboard Imperial vessels, and the arcane mechanisms scattered about the periphery of the docking bay seemed somehow simpler and more compact. What this meant I had no idea, beyond a vague notion

that our intrepid hunters of archeotech had been pipped to the post, and that anything useful had probably been salvaged by others generations before; but Yaffel and the others didn't seem in the least bit downhearted, chirruping away to one another nineteen to the dozen, and pointing things out with fingers and mechadendrites like juvies in a confectionery store.

A final impact jarred against my spine, and the shrieking of the engines died back to a pitch which enabled me to remove the headset. Jurgen shook his head, scattering dandruff, as he followed suit.

'Well, that didn't take long,' he commented, checking his lasgun as he hopped down to the floor from the Space Marine-sized chair he'd been sitting in. 'Better bring a footstool next time.'

'Good idea,' I said, flexing the pins and needles out of my legs, and wondering why I hadn't thought of that myself. A faint tremor was transmitting itself through the deck beneath my feet, which seemed a little odd, and I found myself looking around for the cause.

'Amazing,' Yaffel said, staring out of the viewport for a moment, before turning to Drumon with a self-congratulatory air. 'The autonomic relays appear still to be functioning.'

I didn't have a clue what he was talking about, of course, but the gist of it was clear enough: the ship's machine-spirit must still have been watching over the hangar bay, even after all these millennia, because the massive doors were sliding closed, with a smoothness and precision quite eerie to behold. Back on the *Revenant* it had taken a dozen void-suited crewmen to supervise the equivalent mechanism, and the same number again to begin pumping the atmosphere into the chamber once it was sealed. Here, it seemed, the ship was capable of doing the job for itself.

'Who's closing the hangar doors?' Jurgen asked, hefting his lasgun as he peered out of the viewport, evidently expecting hordes of ambushers to rush the Thunderhawk at any moment.

'The vessel's machine-spirit,' the tech-priest told him, no doubt relishing the chance to expound on the miracles of the Machine-God, despite my aide's manifest inability to grasp the finer points of technotheology. (Not that mine's all that great either, I must confess. Either something works or it doesn't so far as I'm concerned, and if it doesn't it's an enginseer's problem. That's why we have tech-priests in the first place.) 'It's clearly aware of our presence.'

'Then let's hope it's the only one,' I said, scanning the shadows for signs

of movement. I had no idea if genestealers could survive without air,<sup>114</sup> but I learned a long time ago that it never pays to underestimate an enemy.

Drumon glanced in my direction, a data-slate in his hand, and nodded reassuringly. 'None of the CATs are registering movement,' he said, 'so it seems a reasonable inference.'

'So far,' I said.

'So far,' Drumon agreed, and donned his helmet. When he spoke again, his voice was flattened a little by the external vox speaker. 'I'll let you know the moment anything registers.' He began to make his way to the nearest airlock, no doubt intent on doing whatever was necessary to provide us with something outside we could breathe, but before he could enter it, I became aware of a faint tendril of mist wafting past the viewport.

'I think you've just been saved another job,' I said, beginning to understand why he and Yaffel were so keen to recover the ancient technologies which made marvels like this possible. Once they were understood, they could undoubtedly be used for the benefit of the Imperium in ways I couldn't even imagine. However great the hypothetical gains may have been, however, the threat of the genestealers was both real and immediate, and I resolved not to let my guard down for a second.

'So it appears,' the Techmarine agreed. He gestured towards the boarding ramp, including us all in the general invitation. 'Shall we take advantage of the fact?'

'By all means,' I agreed, determined to at least look as though I felt confident of surviving the next few hours, and fell into step beside him.



## EIGHTEEN

My initial impression, as my boots first echoed on deck plates half as old as the Imperium,<sup>115</sup> was, surprisingly, one of peace. The venerability and size of the cavernous hangar bay lent it something of the air of a cathedral, and although I've never had much time for the songs and pongs,<sup>116</sup> I must admit to finding such places pleasantly tranquil on the few occasions I've had reason to enter them. The ceiling was high and devoid of the curving buttresses I'd have expected to see supporting it aboard a Navy vessel, but the bas-relief aquila on the far wall, looming over everything, was reassuring enough, even though it had been rendered in a fashion which made it look as though it was floating without sufficient support for its weight. The air was musty, of course, but no worse than one would expect to find on the lower levels of the average hive, and I found the spurious sense of familiarity which that imparted to our surroundings was also helping to put me at my ease a little – at least as much as was possible under the circumstances.

'This isn't so bad,' Jurgen said, producing a luminator from somewhere among his collection of utility pouches, and snapping it onto the bayonet lugs of his lasgun. The external lights of the Thunderhawk were still burning brightly enough to render our immediate surroundings clearly visible, but he swept the shadows in the corners methodically nevertheless, and I nodded, commending his caution.

'So far, so good,' I agreed, unfastening the flap of my holster and loosening my chainsword in its scabbard. The Terminators trotted forwards

to secure our beachhead, their weapons at the ready, and I relaxed a little; nothing was going to get past them without being noticed, and raising an unholy racket in the process. To my surprise, however, instead of taking up firing positions to cover the door leading from the hangar to the stygian gloom of the corridor beyond, the hulking figures passed straight on through it and disappeared.

‘Where are they off to?’ Jurgen asked, sounding about as puzzled as I felt.

‘Fanning out to cover our line of advance to the cogitator banks,’ Drumon said, looming over us as he approached. ‘There are a number of cross corridors intersecting with our optimum route.’

‘Good idea,’ I agreed, remembering the tangle of ducting and passageways projected in the hololith. There were far too many opportunities for ambush for my liking, and it made sense to plug as many of them as possible with sentries before the main body of the expedition departed the hangar bay. ‘Wouldn’t want to find a horde of genestealers charging up your... aah, magos. Got everything you need?’

‘I believe so,’ Yaffel confirmed, rolling up with his servitors, and a gaggle of red-robed acolytes, in tow. Most of them were lugging more junk than Jurgen, although what purpose it served was way beyond me. The only thing I recognised for certain was the bolter Drumon was carrying, and, with a sudden thrill of apprehension, it dawned on me that, apart from the Techmarine, Jurgen and I were the only people in sight holding weapons. ‘We won’t know for certain until we reach the sanctum, of course, but we’ve been able to anticipate most contingencies.’

‘Apart from having to fight your way out,’ I said. ‘Don’t you think a few guns might be advisable?’

‘The risks are negligible,’ Yaffel assured me airily. ‘We’re still getting no sign of movement from the CATs, and in the unlikely event of a dormant genestealer or two reviving inside our perimeter, I’m certain the Terminators will be able to keep them away from our party.’

‘Our party?’ I echoed, masking my horror as best I could. ‘I was under the impression Jurgen and I were along merely as observers.’ A responsibility I’d been intending to discharge from the safety and relative comfort of the Thunderhawk’s passenger compartment, well away from any genestealers that might be lurking in the vicinity.

‘What better opportunity to observe, then?’ Yaffel asked, as though bestowing an enormous favour. ‘You can monitor the communication

channels just as effectively through your comm-bead while you accompany us, and see the recovery operation at first hand while you're about it.'

'A chance not to be missed,' I agreed, masking the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach with the ease of a lifetime's dissembling. He still seemed dangerously sanguine about the chances of a genestealer attack to me, but at least we'd have a squad of Terminators to hide behind, and from what I'd seen of the ease with which they'd cleansed the nest under Fidelis, they wouldn't be got past easily. I could still have refused to go, of course, but that would have meant sacrificing a measure of Drumon's regard, and with it my undeserved standing among the Reclaimers. So, as ever in that kind of situation, I resolved to simply make the best of a bad job, and be prepared to make a run for it at a moment's notice.

As it turned out, though, my fears appeared to be unfounded, at least to begin with. After leaving the docking bay we made surprisingly good time, the corridors free of clutter and detritus for the most part, although the occasional ceiling panel had fallen, and some of the deck plates were sufficiently corroded to present a trip hazard to the unwary. In one or two places there were signs of more serious obstruction, but these had been removed from our path by the vanguard of Terminators, and no serious obstacles to our progress remained.

The only other sign that our companions had come this way before us was the channel of disturbed dust along the centre of the passageway, and the occasional cyclopean footprint, picked out by Jurgen's luminator. His was the only one kindled, leaving the echoing darkness to wrap itself oppressively around us. I had no problem with this: our environment was sufficiently close to the underhives I'd grown up in for all my old instincts to have returned, the way sounds rebounded from the surfaces surrounding us and the feel of stray air currents against my face more than compensating for the lack of light, and I was perfectly happy not to be making myself an obvious target by carrying one. Drumon, I was sure, had no need of a luminator to find his way in any case, his helmet being stuffed with artificial senses to supplement his own, and no doubt the tech-priests had sufficient augmetic eyes and the like between them not to bump into things and each other too often.

We came across one of the Terminators within a few moments of setting off, his back to the corridor, facing one of the side passages, his twin-barrelled bolter aimed down it in a reassuringly steady grip. As we carried

on past him, Drumon pausing to exchange a few words with his comrade, I realised for the first time just how bulky the heavy armour was; even the Techmarine looked relatively slight standing next to it. The Terminator, by contrast, filled almost the entire width of the narrow passageway, the hunched shoulders rising up behind his helmet brushing against the ceiling, and for the first time I began to wonder if perhaps we'd have been better off with a lighter, more nimble escort. If the worst came to the worst, these lumbering behemoths would block the constricted corridors like corks in a bottle. I don't mind admitting that chills of apprehension chased one another down my spine at that thought, my morbid imagination being able to picture the consequences of being unable to shoot past our guardians, or dodge round them to flee unhindered, all too well.

'Any signs of movement?' I asked, as I came abreast of his back, and the Terminator responded at once, his voice echoing slightly in my comm-bead as it overlapped with the one issuing from the external speaker of his armour.

'A few faint auspex returns, very tenuous,' he told me. 'No visual contact.' Which pretty much confirmed my earlier guess about the sensorium links in his helmet.

My palms began tingling again. 'How distant?' I asked.

'They're reading at about three hundred metres,' he told me, apparently quite unconcerned. 'If they're there at all.'

'Just auspex ghosts,' Yaffel said confidently. 'Nothing to worry about.'

'Ghosts?' Jurgen asked, sounding mildly curious, and no more perturbed than usual. 'Are the wrecks haunted?' He swung his luminator around for a moment, as if hoping to find the shade of some long-deceased crewman dripping ectoplasm on the bulkheads.

'It's a theological term,' Yaffel explained patiently, 'for a false reading, which looks like a genuine trace. Even the most conscientious of machine-spirits will sometimes be mistaken, or perhaps be moved by a sense of mischief inappropriate to the sanctity of their task.'

'Or perhaps there really is something out there,' I said, drawing my laspistol. The gesture may have been futile, but the weight of the weapon in my hand felt comforting, and I stretched my senses, listening intently for sounds of scrabbling in the dark.

'If there is, it'll just be vermin,' Yaffel assured me easily, with a faintly supercilious glance at my drawn sidearm, 'or cables moving in the air

current from the recirculators.'

'Vermin that's spent countless generations exposed to the warp?' I wondered aloud. 'Emperor alone knows what that'll have evolved into.' Or what it lived on, come to that. Foraging wouldn't exactly be easy in an environment composed mainly of metal, which was why the genestealers tended to hibernate between systems. (At least according to the archives Gries had authorised my access to, and remarkably thin they'd turned out to be, considering this particular space hulk had first been reliably identified almost two thousand years ago.<sup>117</sup>)

Yaffel subsided, looking a bit less sure of himself, although I had little enough time to enjoy my minor victory. I voxed Drumon, sure that he'd been paying at least partial attention to the conversation. 'Any change in the readings from the CATs?' I enquired.

'Still no sign of movement in their immediate vicinity,' the Techmarine responded at once, confirming my guess. 'But another one just ceased transmission.'

'In the same way as the first?' I asked, feeling a sense of vague disquiet.

'Precisely,' Drumon confirmed. His helmet swivelled towards Yaffel. 'It should be recovered for examination. So high a failure rate may point to an unforeseen environmental factor.'

'That may be the case,' the tech-priest conceded, sounding more than a little unhappy at the possibility. 'But our highest priority has to be the recovery of the cogitator core.'

I craned my neck to catch a glimpse of the data-slate Yaffel had produced. A deck plan, familiar from the hololith aboard the *Revenant*, was displayed on the tiny screen, our position marked precisely where I'd expected us to be, and a speckling of icons around us picked out the cordon of Terminators. A wider scattering of coloured dots a little way beyond them, most of which were moving slowly and erratically, just had to be the CATs; the one nearest to us was both stationary and limned in red, indicating that it had just malfunctioned.

'That goes without saying,' I said, thinking rapidly. If Jurgen and I branched off at the next cross corridor, always assuming we could squeeze past the Terminator guarding it, we'd reach the downed mechanism in a handful of minutes. It wouldn't be hard to manhandle it back to the Thunderhawk, and we could spend the rest of the time before our departure with several centimetres of ceramite and a reassuring amount of firepower



between us and the genestealers infesting this deathtrap, instead of roaming around a pitch-dark labyrinth waiting for something to pounce on us. 'But Drumon has a point too. If there is something about the hulk affecting our devices, there's no telling what could fail next.'

'That's highly unlikely,' Yaffel said, with an air of studied unconcern, no doubt reflecting that for someone as dependent on augmetics as he was I'd just raised a rather disturbing possibility. 'But I suppose it would be prudent to look into it. What do you suggest?'

'Maybe Jurgen and I could recover the CAT,' I said, as if the idea had only just occurred to me, 'while you push on to the objective. We won't be much help with the theological stuff anyway, and everyone else will be needed to salvage the cogitators.'

'That would seem to be the most efficient use of our resources,' Drumon agreed. He indicated the icon marking the Terminator guarding the next junction. 'Brother Blain can accompany you, as that shouldn't compromise our perimeter. He can resume his post once you've picked up the CAT.'

'Sounds good to me,' I agreed, passing through a doorway into a roughly square chamber, where the clawed Terminator who'd conversed with us briefly aboard the Thunderhawk was on sentry go. Like the other portals we'd passed through on the way here,<sup>118</sup> it had been left open, presumably by the advance guard ahead of us; the door to the left as we entered was open too, the tracks on the floor of the exposed corridor confirming that it was indeed the route to our objective, while the pair directly ahead and to our right remained tightly closed.

Jurgen and I moved aside, into the far corner, clearing the way for the rest of our party to turn to the left and clatter off into the darkness, while Drumon and Blain exchanged a few words. If the Terminator was surprised or resentful of his sudden change of orders he gave no sign of it, merely beckoning to us to follow as he slapped the palm plate set into the wall next to the door opposite the one we'd entered the room by.

'This way,' he said, unnecessarily, as the thick steel plate moved smoothly aside, with none of the metallic groaning I'd become used to aboard the vessels I'd travelled on. Jurgen shone his luminator down the corridor thus revealed, picking out nothing more threatening than another identical portal closing off the end of it some ten or twelve metres away.

'After you,' I said, mindful of my earlier fears, and unwilling to find myself trapped between a jammed doorway and a lumbering ceramite giant

if it all went plain-shaped, something my well-developed paranoid streak kept insisting could only be a matter of time. Whatever the tech-priest might prefer to believe, there were definitely genestealers somewhere around, and that meant they were bound to show up sooner or later. 'Anything on the auspex?' It was also a pretty safe bet that, like the Terminator we'd passed on our way here, Blain had enough sensory gear built into his helmet to give us a useful head start if the 'stealers started moving in on our position.

'Nothing significant,' Blain said. 'I'm picking up faint signs of movement on the deck above us, but nothing on this level at all.' He led the way into the narrow passage, filling it almost completely, like a mobile wall, while Jurgen and I trotted in his wake, our weapons aimed back behind us in case of unexpected ambush. A moment later he stopped abruptly, almost provoking an undignified collision. 'It should be through here.'

Another pneumatic hiss, as air pressures equalised on either side of the opening door, and he stepped through into a wider pool of darkness. Jurgen followed, sweeping the luminator around the walls, and, reassured that there was nothing lurking in the gloom waiting to pounce, I took up the rear.

We were in another square chamber, I realised at once, the ambient echoes enough to tell me that even if the beam of my aide's luminator hadn't been bouncing off the walls, picking out another three doors, all closed. Blain was plodding towards the middle of the enclosed space, casually pushing aside a few scattered cargo containers which would have taxed a heavy-lift servitor, when he stopped and looked down. (Or, to be more accurate, his helmet tilted a few degrees from the vertical, which seemed to be about as much head movement as anyone wearing a Terminator suit was capable of.)

'It's over here,' he said, gesturing towards a tangle of twisted metal by his foot.

Jurgen and I hurried over to join him, the shattered mechanism pinned in the beam of the luminator. I activated my comm-bead, staring at the wrecked CAT in perplexity. Things had indeed taken a turn for the worse, but not quite in the manner I'd anticipated.

'Drumon,' I voxed, 'we've found it. And you were right about an environmental factor being to blame.'

'With respect, commissar,' Yaffel cut in, before the Techmarine was able to reply, 'that's hardly a determination you're qualified to make.'

'In this case I am,' I said, not too perturbed to enjoy the moment.

‘Somebody’s shot it. With a medium-calibre bolter, if the damage is anything to go by.’

There was a moment of stunned silence, broken only by the faint hissing of static, before Drumon replied. ‘Genestealers do not use guns.’

‘Hybrids do,’ I said, with the unshakable authority of personal experience. ‘I recommend you proceed with extreme caution.’ Which was hardly necessary advice under the circumstances, but it wouldn’t hurt to look as though I was taking the mission seriously.

‘Noted,’ Drumon replied, in the tones of a man intending to follow that advice to the letter.

I turned to Blain. ‘Anything on the auspex within firing range?’ I asked, suddenly conscious that what might have seemed a reasonably safe distance from a purestrain would be anything but from a hybrid with a bolter.

‘Still nothing on this level,’ he assured me, sounding faintly disappointed – but then he was walking around behind enough ceramite to shrug off a direct hit from anything short of a tank shell.<sup>119</sup> Not being similarly blessed, I was a great deal less sanguine, you may be sure.

I walked around the chewed-up mechanism, wondering how best to shift it. Up close, it seemed a lot larger, and considerably more unwieldy, than I’d anticipated. Jurgen and I should still be able to manage it between us, though, but it would mean having to stow our weapons, and for a moment I hesitated; but our journey back to the hangar bay would be protected by the cordon of Terminators, so the risk of doing that should be minimal, and the only alternative I could see was to admit defeat and catch up with the others. I’d promised Drumon I’d recover his toy, and scuttling back to the Thunderhawk without it would undermine my credibility with his Chapter, so it was either that or show willing by taking my turn as ‘stealer bait. Something about the shattered CAT’s position seemed subtly wrong to me, although I couldn’t for the life of me see why.

‘How do you think it got in here?’ Jurgen asked, and I shrugged, my mind still mainly engaged with the more pressing matter of where best to get a grip on the blasted thing.

‘The same way we did, I suppose,’ I told him.

‘Oh.’ He frowned in perplexity. ‘I just don’t see how it got the door open, that’s all.’

‘It couldn’t,’ I said in some alarm, glancing at the open portal behind us, and the three others, all firmly closed. I brought my laspistol up and began

backing away towards the door we'd come in by, trying to keep all the scattered cargo containers covered at once. Confident as always in my judgement, though Emperor knows why, Jurgen brought his lasgun up to a firing position and fell into place at my back, bringing a welcome sense of greater security and a blast of halitosis as he did so.

'Commissar?' Blain asked, sounding about as baffled as my aide usually did. 'Is something wrong?'

'The room was sealed when we arrived,' I said, chills of apprehension chasing one another down my spine. 'Whatever shot it could still be here.'

'If it was, it would have registered on the auspex before we entered,' Blain said, with what sounded suspiciously like a trace of amusement in his tone. 'And it would be dead by now.'

I should have found that reassuring, but for some reason it only increased my apprehension. I stared at the detritus surrounding the crippled CAT, and sudden horrified understanding burst in on me. 'The blips on the next level,' I asked urgently. 'How close are they?'

'A score or so metres,' Blain replied evenly.

'Out! Now!' I said, Jurgen responding instantly, as I'd known he would, while the Terminator simply took a couple of paces in our direction, no doubt wondering if I'd lost my wits. Suddenly the air current I'd assumed was coming from a grille above our heads took on far more sinister connotations, and I drew my chainsword, powering up the blade as I did so. 'Jurgen, the ceiling!'

'Commissar.' My aide complied at once, raising the luminator attached to his lasgun, and picking out a ragged hole in the roof of the chamber. The luckless CAT hadn't been sniped, as I'd first assumed, just struck by a single bolt from a whole burst, the rest of which had chewed up the floor plates around it badly enough to drop it through to the deck below. To my horror, the attenuated beam picked out something moving in the shadows beyond the gap, bounding forwards inhumanly fast, before flowing like quicksilver through the aperture above us.

'Blain!' I just had time to shout. 'Look out!' then the first of the purestrains was on him. I saw the crackle of arcane energies I'd marked before in Fidelis playing about the blades at the end of his arms, as he parried the 'stealer's first blow, matching it slash for slash. It fell, bisected, while Jurgen and I opened up with our las weapons, secure in the knowledge that we could harm only our foes. Sure enough, another of the

creatures fell, in the act of leaping towards us, while a few stray las-rounds expended themselves harmlessly against the reassuring bulk of the Terminator's ceramite.

Then I felt the breath constricting in my throat. Parallel grooves had been scored deeply into the surface of the impregnable armour, where the first genestealer had struck before being dispatched, and some thick, dark fluid was seeping from it, crusting like resin to seal the damage.<sup>120</sup> I hesitated, unwilling to risk felling an ally by friendly fire now his suit had been breached, but events were out of my hands by this time: as Jurgen and I began to retreat down the corridor, a third purestrain threw itself at Blain's unprotected back. He ducked forwards, lowering his right shoulder as far as the cumbersome armour would allow, trying to dislodge it in the manner of a wrestler attacked from behind, but to no avail; powerful talons tore into the ceramite as easily as a potter's fingers into clay, finding purchase where none should exist. Blain backed into the wall, hard, and chitin cracked. The 'stealer keened, an ululation of agony which made my teeth ache and pierced the space behind my eyes like a sliver of razor-edged ice, echoing off into the darkness, but held on regardless, distending its jaws as some foul-smelling ichor issued from the cracks in its carapace.

'Turn round!' I bellowed, forgetting in the terror of the moment that Blain could hear me perfectly well over the vox. 'Let us get a shot at it!' The Terminator stumbled in our direction, abused servos in his knee and ankle joints whining in protest, but before he could comply the genestealer brought its head forwards over his own, and before my horrified eyes sank its teeth deep into the ceramite of his helmet. The deck plates shuddered as Blain fell to his knees, and the 'stealer on his back brought round a handful of wickedly curving talons, to plunge them into the joint where helmet and suit conjoined. The vox in my ear carried a small sound, somewhere between a cough and a sigh, and Blain collapsed, toppling towards Jurgen and myself, his torso clattering resonantly to the metal floor of the corridor.

The 'stealer raised its head and stared at Jurgen and I, apparently bemused, shaking its head as if it had been dazed by the impact.<sup>121</sup> Then it seemed to rally, fixing me with a gaze of pure malevolence. Its momentary hesitation was to prove its undoing, however, as Jurgen and I had taken advantage of the brief respite to centre it in our sights; before it could spring at us, we fired almost as one, tearing it apart in a flurry of las-bolts.

'Blain's down,' I voxed, 'dead, I think.' To my surprise, my voice sounded

calm and authoritative, despite the panic rush of adrenaline hammering through my system. 'Three purestrains accounted for, but there are probably others close by.' The faint echo of scrabbling talons drifted to my ears. 'Correction, definitely others, moving this way.' One look at Blain's corpse, stretched across the threshold, was enough to dispel any hope of closing the door against the onrushing tide of talon and mandible; I could barely have moved his hand, never mind that mass of ceramite.

'His lifesigns have ceased,' Drumon confirmed,<sup>122</sup> after what was probably no more than an instant or two, but seemed considerably longer. This came as a relief; for a moment I'd feared having to attempt some kind of rescue, despite the manifest impossibility of success, in order to maintain my reputation.

'Then we're pulling out,' I said, backing away down the narrow corridor as quickly as I dared, reluctant to take my laspistol off aim for fear of the worst. And with good reason: an instant before Jurgen and I reached the opposite end, bursting arse-first into the chamber Blain had been guarding in a manner I've no doubt anyone observing our arrival would have found comical in the extreme, the head and shoulders of another purestrain erupted into the passage, the misshapen body behind it attempting to force its way past the obstructing cadavers. Jurgen and I popped off a couple of rounds each to discourage it, scoring a lucky hit or two, but the chitinous horror proved as resilient as most of its kind, merely ducking back as our las-bolts vaporised fist-sized chunks of its exoskeleton.<sup>123</sup> That bought us enough time to hit the palm plate, though, and before the 'stealer or any of its companions could recover, the thick metal slab slid back into place, sealing them in.

Or us, I suppose, as they still had the run of most of the hulk; and so far as I was concerned, they were welcome to it.

'What now, sir?' Jurgen asked. 'Should we catch up with the others?'

I shook my head. 'Back to the Thunderhawk,' I said, no longer giving the proverbial flying one what anybody thought. I'd come up with some kind of excuse before Drumon and the cogboys returned, if they ever did. We might have evaded them this time, but the brood mind was now aware of our presence aboard the hulk, and would be mobilising its genestealers against us as surely and dispassionately as antibodies against an invading virus. I exhaled, releasing the tension which had wound my body tight, trembling a little from the adrenaline comedown, and tapped my comm-bead. 'We're

back at the sentry point. More 'stealers in pursuit, but we've sealed the hatch, so the perimeter's secure again.'

I should have known better, of course; a genestealer brood may be only a pale reflection of the tyrannid hive which originally spawned it, but its gestalt intelligence is a powerful one. The broods I'd encountered on Viridia and Keffia should have taught me that, but the individual purestrains behave so much like predatory animals that I'd fallen into the trap of believing them to be little more than mindless beasts – an error pointed out to me in the most stark and graphic manner possible, as the door slid smoothly open again, and an entire pack of the creatures boiled into the room.



## NINETEEN

‘Perimeter breached!’ I yelled, opening up again with my laspistol, and wishing I’d replaced the powerpack while I’d had the chance. Jurgen flicked the selector of his lasgun to full auto, no doubt reflecting that if we didn’t manage to check the creatures’ headlong rush, running out of ammunition was going to be the least of our worries. The leading one fell under the hail of las-bolts, not a second too soon, still reaching out for me, and I swatted its wickedly taloned hand aside with the blade of my chainsword as I retreated.

To my horror, a babble of overlapping voices answered my warning, and the distant roar of heavy bolters echoing through the corridors from what seemed like every direction immediately confirmed my worst fears. It seemed the genestealers had merely been biding their time, building up their numbers at the limits of auspex range, before attacking in force.

‘Multiple signals all round!’ one of the Terminators confirmed. ‘Closing fast.’

‘Engaging,’ another called, as I cracked off a fusillade of shots at the ‘stealer bounding over the corpse of the group leader, seemingly fixated on ripping my spleen out. This time the las-bolts barely slowed it, and I parried the first slash of its talons with my chainsword, feeling the screaming teeth bite deep into chitin. I followed up reflexively, stepping inside the reach of its quartet of arms, and driving the tip of the blade up through its jaw as I did so, to bury it deep in the creature’s brain.

‘Commissar!’ Jurgen fired another burst, slowing the next one as it lunged,



and I pivoted aside, dragging the expiring 'stealer with me to impede the progress of its fellow, as the chainblade ripped free, bisecting its skull. 'This way!' He'd taken up a position defending the door we'd first entered the chamber by, guarding our line of retreat back to the Thunderhawk, and I made haste to join him, shooting randomly into the middle of the pack as I went. His lasgun barked again, then went silent. 'Sorry sir, I'm dry.'

Deprived of his covering fire I fell back on my duellist's reflexes, retreating step by step, parrying by pure instinct each blow that sought to eviscerate me. There was no time for thought, and if I tried I'd be dead. A couple of times I fired my pistol again, once downing another of the 'stealers with a lucky shot through the eye socket, but relying in the main for my survival on the well-worn blade in my hand. I've no doubt that the hours of practice I'd spent in the *Revenant's* tertiary training chapel, and my sparring bouts with Drumon, saved my miserable skin in those few frantic moments, the keen edge they'd imparted to my fighting skills making all the difference.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed Jurgen's hand dip into one of his array of pouches, but, to my surprise and consternation, instead of the lasgun powercell I'd been expecting, he drew out a frag grenade. Before I could shout a word of caution he'd already primed it, only the pressure of his grip forestalling an explosion which would undoubtedly kill us both in so confined a space. Watching me intently, he retreated a step or two, into the corridor behind him.

Well, grenade or no, it still seemed a healthier place to be than the middle of a genestealer swarm, so I swung the chainsword in a last desperate arc, driving my assailants back for the space of a heartbeat, and scrambled through the portal myself, smacking the palm plate as I passed it. Not that closing the door had helped much the last time, but even a second or two's head start would be better than nothing, and after more than a decade of serving together I thought I had a pretty good idea of what Jurgen had in mind.

I was right. The second I reached for the door control my aide lobbed the frag charge he'd readied, and the metal slab slid smoothly closed just before it detonated. The dull thump of the explosion was followed instantly by a metallic clatter, like someone dropping a tray full of tanna spoons,<sup>124</sup> as the hailstorm of razor-edged shrapnel shards pattered against the sheltering steel plate. (With any luck after passing through a considerable thickness of

intervening genestealer.)

‘Nicely done,’ I congratulated my aide, and he nodded with quiet satisfaction. ‘But what would you have done if they’d killed me before I got to the door control?’

‘Hit the plate with my elbow,’ Jurgen said, as incapable as ever of recognising a joke, and I nodded too, as if considering the matter.

‘That would have worked,’ I conceded. ‘But I’m pleased I could save you the bother.’

‘Me too, sir,’ he agreed, snapping another powercell into his lasgun at last, and, sure that he was now able to keep the door covered in case of any more unpleasant surprises, I lost no time in following suit. According to the glowing runes in the butt which kept track of such things, the number of shots remaining were down to single figures, and I wanted a lot more than that in hand with ‘stealers on the loose.

We waited tensely for a second or two, our weapons aimed at the blank metal slab, but if there were any ‘stealers left on the other side capable of opening it to pursue us, they had more sense than to try. When it became clear nothing was going to happen, I turned and began to lead the way back towards the Thunderhawk at a rapid jog. I must admit it crossed my mind to put a las-bolt through the palm plate, just to make sure we couldn’t be followed, but reason prevailed over the impulse. I’d hardly be able to maintain my good standing with the Reclaimers if anyone survived the genestealers’ initial onslaught, only to discover that I’d sealed them in with a slaving horde of ravaging purestrains, and there was no guarantee that damaging the controls would secure the hatch in any case. For all I knew, the machine-spirit which had nursed this wrecked vessel for so long would react to such casual vandalism by opening it again out of pique, and the last thing I needed was provoking it into siding with the chitinous horrors. As it turned out, I was going to be grateful for my restraint sooner than I expected.

‘Pull back,’ Drumon’s voice instructed in my ear, and I realised that only a handful of seconds could have passed since my first panic-stricken warning. ‘Form up on this position, and we’ll punch our way through to the docking bay.’ A chorus of assent answered him, which I ignored; I wasn’t about to put myself in harm’s way again with a safe refuge a mere few minutes running time away.

Or so I thought, until a marked increase in the noise ahead drew my

attention, and I beheld a sight which chilled me almost as much as a Valhallan shower. The Terminator we'd passed on our way in was backing towards us, firing continuously as he came, almost filling the passageway with the bulk of his armour. There wasn't a heretic's prayer of getting past him, although given that the strobing muzzle flashes of his storm bolter<sup>125</sup> were affording lurid glimpses of a mass of genestealers pressing him hard, I'd feel seriously disinclined to try. They were falling in droves, as you might expect, but for every one which went down, another would appear, bounding over the corpses of its fellows to charge straight down the barrels of his gun. What they were hoping to achieve by this was beyond me, at least to begin with; like the 'nids that spawned them, genestealer broods seem to regard individual members of the group mind as essentially expendable, but in my experience they only did so in pursuit of an objective. This seemed like a wanton waste of life, even by their standards.

'Back,' I told Jurgen, unnecessarily, as there was clearly nowhere else to go; not even an air duct we could have squeezed down at a pinch. He nodded, phlegmatic as always, and began jogging back the way we'd come.

As I turned to follow, the purpose of the brood mind's strategy became horrifyingly clear. The Terminator's weapon jammed, probably overheated by the constant firing; for a moment he struggled to clear it, then the leading 'stealer surged forwards, slashing with its talons. The Terminator stood his ground, trying to fend it off with the useless weapon, but the creature had an unbreakable grip on his arm. As he tried to tear it free with his other hand, a second one sprang out of the darkness, ripping open the ceramite protecting his torso as though it were paper. Before I could even think of trying to intervene, he was down, the tremors of his fall vibrating through my bootsoles, and I turned and ran, while the rest of the pack skittered and struggled to get past the bulky obstruction to dismember my aide and I.

No doubt warned by the echoes of my sprinting footfalls, Jurgen put on a burst of speed too, striking the door plate with his elbow as he passed it, and diving through the widening gap without slowing, his lasgun at the ready. No sounds of combat ensued, so I followed without hesitation, cracking off a few shots as I turned to close the hatch behind us. The bolts impacted on the snout of a 'stealer which had managed to get past the deceased Space Marine and the tangle of its fellows still atop him, and got far too close to my unprotected back for comfort. It reeled from the impacts and lay thrashing on the floor of the passage, although whether I'd done enough to

kill it I'll never know. The door slid closed, hiding the sight of the carnage beyond.

'We'd better get moving,' I said, picking my way through the chunks of genestealer decorating the room, a rather satisfying result of Jurgen's trick with the grenade. Now the creatures were dead, there seemed to be fewer of them than I remembered, although whether that was because the survivors had fled, or I'd simply been too busy for an accurate headcount at the time, I couldn't be sure. 'They'll be through at any moment.'

'Down here?' Jurgen asked, flashing his luminator along the passageway Drumon and the tech-priests had taken the first time we'd passed through the chamber. I listened for a moment and shook my head. An all-too-familiar scrabbling sound was echoing out of the darkness beyond the range of the beam.

'No,' I said. 'The 'stealers are ahead of us.' No doubt they were intent on slaughtering the salvage party at the moment, but I was certain they'd devote some of their attention to us if we were foolish enough to attract it. I hefted my weapons and struck the control plate of the sealed door opposite; we already knew the other exit led straight to more genestealers, so to my way of thinking this one was the best card in a rather poor hand. Despite my trepidation, however, the darkness beyond was reassuringly silent, so I lost no time in hurrying through; a moment later an increase in the ambient light levels, and a small but perceptible thickening of the atmosphere, told me Jurgen was at my shoulder once more, and I closed the portal again.

'Where are we?' he asked, flashing the beam of his luminator around our refuge. It looked like all the other corridors we'd seen so far, but that didn't bother me; I'd recalled enough of the internal layout I'd seen on the hololith display to remain confident of finding our way back to the hangar bay without too much difficulty, so long as there weren't too many genestealers around to get in the way.

I shrugged. 'Only one way to find out,' I said, leading the way into the darkness.

How long we'd been wandering through the passageways I couldn't be sure, but it was certainly taking a lot longer to get back to the Thunderhawk than I'd expected. My innate sense of direction seemed to be working as well as ever, so I was pretty confident that I knew roughly where both we and it were relative to one another, but there was no getting around the fact

that connecting the two points was a lot less straightforward than I'd hoped. I could still recall the images I'd seen in the hololith in reasonable detail, but the reality of the maze of intersecting passageways we found ourselves negotiating was considerably more complex than the clear lines of the diagram suggested. Some routes were blocked by debris, or unsafe decking, forcing us into time-consuming detours, while other routes were blocked by the echoes of an ominous scrabbling, which betrayed the presence of more genestealers lurking in the darkness ahead. Needless to say, I avoided these passageways entirely, even going so far as to retrace our steps for a while before turning aside, just to make certain we'd given these pockets of activity a wide enough berth to evade detection.

Just to complicate matters, it wasn't long before I realised that we'd passed beyond the section of the *Spawn of Damnation* I'd seen enlarged, so most of the corridors, ducting and cable runs we followed hadn't appeared on the reduced scale of the main map at all: the only things I could be certain of were that we were deviating ever deeper into the core of the hulk, and that we'd passed from the relatively easy going of the derelict we'd first boarded to more decrepit surroundings entirely. On a couple of occasions I even felt a curious sensation of momentary vertigo, as level decks suddenly became slopes, or vice versa, while my eyes stubbornly insisted that nothing had changed.<sup>126</sup> As you can imagine, this was particularly disconcerting when we were traversing sections of the wrecks which were out of kilter with one another in any case; a couple of times Jurgen and I found ourselves picking our way through clumps of defunct luminators protruding from the floor like rusting undergrowth, and realised we were walking along what had once been a ceiling before the warp had claimed whatever luckless vessel this was, and on one particularly unpleasant occasion we traversed a section of ship turned at ninety degrees from its neighbours, where corridors had become abyssal shafts, plunging further than our luminator could plumb, forcing us to scramble around them on narrow ledges which once had been thresholds.

Everywhere we went there were doors, too, although once we'd left the environs of the ancient derelict and the venerable machine-spirit standing guard over it, these had to be manhandled open or closed, with a fair degree of sweat and profanity (The former predominantly from Jurgen, and the latter from me, although I must own that we each contributed liberally to both). In the main, we left the portals we'd passed through open, unwilling

to take the time and effort required to shut them again, and reluctant to cut off a known line of retreat, although I was more than aware of the risk this entailed; you may be certain I kept my ears well open for any suspicious sounds behind us, and we halted on innumerable occasions to listen more carefully and discount the possibility of being followed. Most of the corridors we wandered down were, of course, lined with doors too, but mindful of the effort required to get into them, and spurred on by the worrying possibility that the Thunderhawk would depart without us, we were disinclined to explore any of the side chambers.

Perhaps the most disturbing thing about our present circumstances was that I'd lost contact with Drumon and the surviving Terminators. My comm-bead was certainly continuing to function, if the faint wash of static in my ear was anything to go by, but the fragments of signal traffic I'd been listening to, hoping to keep track of their progress (and, by extension, the whereabouts of the greatest concentration of genestealers, or so I devoutly hoped), had been getting progressively fainter for some time. Now it seemed that the sheer mass of metal between us was preventing the relatively low-powered signals from getting through at all. I found myself wondering if any of our companions were still alive, and hoping so, although the last few garbled transmissions I'd heard had been less than encouraging. Certainly more of the Terminators had fallen, although some had linked up with Drumon by the time I'd lost contact. But from what I'd seen, their chances of making it back to the hangar bay through the labyrinth of narrow corridors were slender at best.

I was roused from my sombre reverie by Jurgen, who was walking a few paces ahead of me, sweeping his luminator methodically across walls, ceiling and floor, paying particular attention to any areas of shadow cast by protrusions or recesses. We'd both seen enough by now to be well aware of how readily the purestrains could conceal themselves, and were by no means sanguine about the possibility of sudden ambush.

'Wait, sir.' He held up a warning hand and advanced a few more paces, the beam picking out a huddled mass on the deck plates ahead of us.

I drew my weapons as it came more clearly into view. 'Is it dead?' I asked. The genestealer remained inert, instead of bounding to its feet and charging us as I would have expected, but I remained alert nevertheless. I'd never seen one asleep before, if they even did, and the middle of the corridor seemed like an odd place to choose for a nap to say the least.

Jurgen pulled the trigger of his lasgun, and the 'stealer remained where it was, despite the fresh crater which appeared in its misshapen forehead. My aide shrugged. 'It is now,' he said, in a matter-of-fact tone.

I listened to the echoes of the *crack* of the weapon's discharge fade away into the distance, rebounding into the labyrinth, and hoped it hadn't attracted any attention; but the damage was already done, if any had been, and chiding him would have been pointless at this juncture. Instead, I merely nodded. 'So it would seem.'

Emboldened, I approached the creature and examined it curiously. The wound Jurgen had inflicted had penetrated its skull, neat as you please, but that wasn't what had done for it. Its thorax was ripped open from the inside, in a manner I could recognise all too easily.

'That's a bolter wound,' I said, wondering how in the warp it had managed to crawl this far from the attacking Space Marines before expiring.

My aide nodded. 'Old one, too,' he added, his face twisting into a grimace of distaste. 'It's getting pretty ripe.'

'It is indeed,' I agreed, the stench of decay belatedly reaching my nostrils through the nearer and more familiar odour of Jurgen. As he widened the sweep of the beam, I began to discern a spattering of dried ichor and viscera on the walls and the grating underfoot. 'And it was shot right here.' I indicated the traces left on our surroundings by the explosive projectile's detonation somewhere within the creature's chest cavity.

Jurgen nodded thoughtfully. 'You think there's another group of Space Marines on board?'

'I doubt it,' I said, after thinking it over for a moment. It was possible that Gries had dispatched another team without telling me, but it hardly seemed likely. Getting our own group together had been an unholy scramble, and I couldn't see that he'd have had the time, even if the Reclaimers did have some clandestine business they didn't want to share with the rest of us. 'Why would they shoot their own CAT?'

Jurgen shrugged. 'Beats me,' he admitted. 'But why would a hybrid shoot another genestealer?'

That didn't make much sense either, and I shrugged in turn. 'We're missing something,' I said, edging gingerly around the repulsive cadaver. But there was no point worrying about it now. The important thing was to get back to the hangar bay and safety as quickly as possible. I hesitated for a moment, reorientating myself, and selected the next right-hand turning I

could see, a few metres further on from where we stood. 'This way, I think.'

For once, it seemed, I was in luck. The corridor I'd chosen was long and unobstructed, and we made good time, despite the caution with which we continued to move. Though I carried on listening as assiduously as ever for the sinister skittering sound I'd come to know so well, there seemed to be a remarkable absence of genestealers in this part of the hulk, for which I gave continual thanks to the Emperor under my breath. Welcome as this unexpected development was, I must admit I found it vaguely disquieting. The only explanation which occurred to me was that Drumon and the Terminators were continuing to make a fight of it, and keeping the brood mind distracted. I couldn't see that happy circumstance lasting for much longer, if it was indeed the case, however, and made as much haste as possible, to wring the maximum advantage from the situation while I still could.

After a while I became aware that our surroundings were growing a little more distinct, the shadowy forms of struts and girders emerging out of the murk, and the outlines of piping and ventilator grilles becoming more clearly visible. I gestured to Jurgen. 'Kill the luminator,' I said.

He complied at once, plunging us into a darkness which seemed at first to be as profound as before. As our eyes adjusted, however, I found I'd been right, a pale glimmer of illumination seeping into our surroundings from somewhere up ahead. 'We need to go carefully,' I cautioned.

'Right you are, sir,' Jurgen agreed, holding his lasgun ready for use, and we pressed on, alert for any signs of ambush. So far as I knew, purestrain genestealers had no more need of light than the Space Marines did, but some hybrids at least seemed more comfortable being able to see where they were going,<sup>127</sup> and I could conceive of no other explanation of the lights ahead of us. We were a long way from our own party, if there was anything left of it at all, and the chances of a luminator system still happening to be functional aboard one of the derelicts after centuries of drifting in the warp without the ministrations of a tech-priest seemed vanishingly small. All my instincts were to turn back and avoid whatever might be waiting for us, but there was no sign of any immediate threat, and the Thunderhawk wouldn't wait for ever. At least if something tried to kill us now we'd be able to see what it was, which in my experience is generally an advantage.

As I'd expected, the ambient light levels continued to grow as we moved



closer to the source, the brightening glow leaking around corners and from side passages, until at last we came to a section of corridor where the luminators were functioning normally. As I stared around us, taking in our surroundings, a sense of disquiet I couldn't quite account for settled over me like the ever-present pall of choking dust. Wires were running from the glow-plates in the ceiling, linking them to one another, and down through a ragged hole in a nearby wall panel, beyond which they'd been crudely spliced into a thicker cable, which sparked and sizzled alarmingly.

'Tracks,' I said, stooping to examine them, but the dust had been kicked up too badly to discern anything other than the fact of considerable activity – something the repairs to the luminators had already been enough to tell me.

Jurgen edged past the hissing cable as though it might suddenly rear up like a serpent to strike at him, and I must confess I felt something of the same apprehension. This was clearly unsanctified work, with none of the amulets or prayers of protection a tech-priest would have put in place to make it safe, and the place positively crackled with the sour scent of danger;<sup>128</sup> I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stirring in response.

So pervasive, in fact, was the sense of some lurking threat in this unhallowed place, that the sudden sound of gunfire erupting from a nearby corridor came almost as a relief.

I hesitated for a moment, torn, as so often in the course of my life, between the impulse to flee and the desire to discover precisely what threat I was facing. In truth, however, there was only one choice to be made, and I did so; on the battlefield it's the unexpected that kills you, and the best chance of safety I had was to find out what else was lurking in these corridors apart from me, a malodorous Guardsman, and an inordinate number of genestealers. I suppose I could have been influenced by the realisation that at least some of the shooting appeared to be coming from a bolter, which might mean the presence of more Reclaimers to hide behind, but in my heart of hearts I knew so convenient a development would be too much to hope for. Accordingly, I gestured for Jurgen to accompany me, and set off to discover what else the Emperor had placed aboard the *Spawn of Damnation* to make my life difficult.

Confident that the sounds of battle would mask any noise we might make, Jurgen and I picked up our pace, grateful for being able to see where we were going at last. The roar of gunfire grew louder as we got closer to its

source, and I tightened my grip on my sidearm, snuggling the grip reassuringly into my palm. My recently acquired augmetics felt like a natural part of my body now, the forefinger resting gently against the trigger needing the merest flexion to spit death at whatever enemy had the temerity to present itself. In my other hand I held the chainsword, my thumb poised to activate the whirling blades at a heartbeat's notice. All of which may convey a little of what I felt at the time; although I was as loath as ever to go looking for trouble, I was pretty confident of being able to deal with any we might come across, especially if we could sneak up on it from behind. A notion, I'm bound to say, which I was soon to be disabused of.

The roar of weapons had increased in volume by now, and I began to pick out the sounds of several different kinds. The unmistakable sibilant bellow of bolter fire I'd already recognised, as I said, but behind and around it was a syncopation of stuttering slug-throwers, and the sharp bark of a shotgun or two. Something about the cacophony struck me as vaguely familiar then, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. There was another sound too, which surrounded and overlaid the others, an inchoate roaring like a deephive sumpfall,<sup>129</sup> which I felt sure I ought to be able to identify, but which somehow continued to elude me.

'We seem to be coming to a hold or something,' Jurgen said, and I nodded, surprised. We'd passed through a few open spaces in our erratic progress, but the last really vast chamber we'd seen had been the hangar bay in which the Thunderhawk had docked; and the deeper we'd penetrated into the hulk, the more constricted our way had seemed to become.<sup>130</sup> Now, though, the pattern of echoes indicated an open space far larger than any we'd so far come across, and I began to move more cautiously again. The passageway we were following seemed to be coming to an end, a rough rectangle of brighter illumination growing ahead of us, although as yet I had no idea what we'd find when we reached it.

As we did so, the noise, no longer attenuated by distance, battered at us like a physical force. I edged forwards a final pace or two, finding the corridor ended in a vertiginous drop, and glanced down, flattening myself against the last metre or so of the metal wall. My breath seemed to congeal in my chest, and I muttered a few expletives, in a combination I'd only previously heard in a gaming establishment when one of the patrons turned out to be carrying a few of his own cards for luck.

Jurgen was, as always, more succinct. 'Orks,' he said, as though they

might somehow have escaped my notice. ‘Thousands of ’em.’

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## TWENTY

At first glance, which was more than enough for me, my aide's estimation of the greenskins' numbers seemed depressingly accurate. Everywhere I looked, there seemed to be more of them. From our vantage point high on its sloping rim, we were able to look down into a vast hollow at the heart of the hulk, hundreds of metres across and almost as many deep, seething with activity. And everywhere my eyes fell there seemed to be more of the creatures, squabbling, hurtling around randomly in ramshackle vehicles, or busying themselves battering metal into new shapes, for purposes which eluded me. There were at least as many gretchin among the larger creatures, of course, scurrying around on errands for whichever ork offered them a measure of protection, being casually swatted out of the way by any others whose progress they impeded, or engaging in vigorous altercations of their own. A pall of smoke drifted over the section where the bustle seemed greatest, where the *mekboyz*<sup>131</sup> and their stunted servants were busying themselves with the construction of new engines of war; but strain my eyes as I might to penetrate the choking shroud, it and the distance combined to obscure any useful details about what they might be up to.

For a moment or two I found myself wondering how a space this big could exist in such a densely tangled accumulation of derelict ships. Then my eye fell on the ragged edge of the deck plates I was standing on, and the answer came to me, as I registered the unmistakable marks of crudely wielded tools: the orks had created this steel cave themselves, hacking away at the metal surrounding them with all the brute force they were capable of,

scavenging the pieces to construct fresh weapons and the other necessities<sup>132</sup> required to support their colonisation of the hulk. Now the reason for the armada which had met us on our arrival at the orkhold became horrifyingly clear. They'd been the stragglers, too late to board the hulk with the others before it returned to the immaterium, impelled by some innate drive deep in the orkish psyche to migrate with the warp tides wherever they led.<sup>133</sup>

'Holy Throne,' I breathed, as the full implications of this horrifying new development dawned on me. Serendipita wasn't just facing the possibility of stealthy infiltration by the genestealers; as soon as the *Spawn of Damnation* had drifted close enough, a torrent of orkish invaders would erupt from it like pus from a boil, intent on nothing but bloodshed and destruction. Duque's cordon of SDF boats would never be able to stem such a tide, and unless I found some way to warn them, the planet's defenders would be caught completely by surprise.

I reached for the comm-bead in my ear, then let my hand fall without activating it. There was no one close enough to hear the transmission, except possibly the greenskins, and the longer they remained unaware of our presence the better. I drew back a little further into our refuge, but none of the creatures so much as glanced in our direction, those close enough to have noticed our arrival completely absorbed in the source of the gunfire which had first attracted our attention. As happens so often among orks, a quarrel seemed to have broken out between two of the innumerable factions among the horde, and they'd promptly begun to settle their differences in the usual fashion of their kind. Around a dozen were firing weapons at their rivals, with the general lack of accuracy I'd had plenty of cause to be thankful for during my encounters with them on Perlia, while almost twice as many hacked and belaboured one another with a variety of blades and cudgels, and several hundred of their fellows called out encouragement or insult<sup>134</sup> from the sidelines, heedless of the danger of being felled by a stray round or two.

The opposing leaders were easy enough to pick out, being bigger than any of their compatriots, and brandishing the largest and most destructive weapons in sight. Each wore crude armour, decorated with the barbarous glyphs which the greenskins employ in place of both heraldry and script, and Jurgen nodded sagely. 'Clan leaders,' he said. 'Both used to being warboss.'<sup>135</sup>

That made sense. I'd seen on Perlia how different tribes would put aside

their enmities in the pursuit of a greater conflict, but the old rivalries would remain simmering beneath the surface, leaving such alliances fragile at best. (A circumstance which had worked strongly in our favour, once I'd inadvertently killed the warboss keeping the others in line, and the whole invasion force had fallen apart as his would-be successors turned their guns on one another instead of the Imperial forces opposing them.). If I knew orks (which I did rather more than I'd have liked since Perlia), neither would be willing or able to back down, for the fear of a potential challenger scenting weakness and attempting to usurp their position, which was fine by me: the longer the battle below kept the greenskins' attention diverted, while Jurgen and I slipped away quietly, the better I liked it.

I took a last look around the echoing steel cave, gauging its extent as best I could, and felt a faint shiver of apprehension. It would take us hours to circumvent, particularly if we did our best to remain at a safe distance from it to minimise the possibility of discovery, and the chances of the Thunderhawk still waiting in the hangar bay by the time we reached it were minimal. Not for the first time I reminded myself that minimal and non-existent were far from synonymous, and that crucial distinction had made all the difference between survival and death often enough by now to ram the lesson home. (Though not nearly as thoroughly as the ensuing decades were to do, as circumstance and ill-luck forced me to apply it over and over again.).

'Pull back,' I told Jurgen, *sotto voce*, although the cacophony from below was still enough to drown out a marching band. If anything it was growing louder, as another ork *nob*,<sup>136</sup> larger and more generally repulsive than either of the other two, and surrounded by bodyguards who at least matched them in physique, ploughed through the baying crowd, bellowing orders and threats. I would have surmised him to be the warboss of the entire *waaaaghh!* from this alone, even without the distinct resemblance to the late and unlamented Korbul.<sup>137</sup> 'Time we were leaving.'

'Right you are, sir,' Jurgen agreed, no doubt considering that the multitude below were rather too many to take on, ancestral vendetta or no. He indicated the warboss, who was restoring order with all the tact and subtlety of a Khornate berserker with a hangover, and patted his lasgun. 'Shame I can't get a clean shot from here, though.'

'It'd make a good trophy,' I agreed, retracing our steps as quickly as I could consistent with caution, in case he was tempted to take a crack at it

anyway. That would be all I needed, an army of hacked-off orks chasing after me, as well as playing dodge the genestealer. 'But I'm not sure there's room for it on the wall of your quarters.'

'Probably not,' Jurgen conceded, after a moment's reflection. Then he brightened. 'But at least we know who shot the CAT thing now.'

'I suppose we do,' I said, as we regained the welcoming gloom of the unlit tunnels at last. The indiscriminate hail of bolter fire which had blasted a hole in the deck as well as the target was certainly consistent with orkish ideas of marksmanship. But orks were looters by nature, almost as innately as they were fighters, and none of the greenskins I'd previously encountered would have abandoned a prize like that after disabling it, especially with a contingent of mekboyz around to barter for the remains once they'd dragged it home. The palms of my hands itched again, but whatever disquieting pattern my subconscious was recognising failed to elbow its way into my forebrain. Knowing better than to try forcing it, I turned my attention to a strategy for getting us back to the hangar bay; unfortunately, the best I could come up with was 'Keep moving and avoid the xenos,' which, although it seemed to have worked so far, seemed a little light on the essential details.

Jurgen nodded sagely. 'Better keep an eye out for perimeter patrols,' he cautioned, rekindling the luminator. 'Must have been one of those that got it. And the 'stealer back there.'

'More than likely,' I agreed. If my innate sense of direction was working as well as it usually did, the docking bay would be somewhere on the far side of the orks' encampment, and it was only too likely that they'd posted outer pickets there, one of whom had used the peripatetic automaton for a spot of target practice. Which meant getting to safety would mean eluding a greater concentration of greenskins from now on, as well as the roving fragments of the brood mind.

Then some of the sense of unease I'd been feeling crystallised suddenly into a hard knot of apprehension. 'If they've got sentries out,' I said slowly, 'why didn't we see any on the way in?'

Jurgen shrugged. 'Maybe the genestealers got them,' he said. 'They were quick enough to get through the hole the orks shot in the floor.'

'They were,' I agreed, the dark shadow still failing to lift from whatever my subconscious was fretting about. 'But we didn't see any of those close to the greenskin camp either.'

‘Apart from the dead one,’ Jurgen reminded me, pausing to put his shoulder to a corroded hatch cover blocking our progress any further. I kept the widening gap covered with my laspistol until we were reasonably certain nothing was going to leap out and attack us, then motioned him through, glancing back down the corridor for any signs of a hostile presence. Despite my obvious apprehension, I heard nothing like the scrabbling of talons or the ringing of iron-shod boots on the deck plates, although my imagination supplied movement enough in the shadows behind us.

‘Shot with a bolter,’ I mused aloud, and Jurgen nodded, no doubt taking the attempt to order my thoughts as a desire for confirmation.

‘Looked like it to me,’ he agreed. ‘And at least a week ago. Could have been more. No way to tell how fast things rot in a place like this.’

‘The orks have been here a lot longer than that,’ I said, understanding beginning to sink in at last. ‘So why hasn’t the brood mind moved against them?’ The genestealers had attacked us less than an hour after our arrival aboard the *Spawn of Damnation*. Yet the orks, who’d presumably been here for weeks on end, still seemed unaware of their presence.

‘Just too many of them?’ Jurgen suggested. Well, that was possible, of course, but according to Gries’s datafiles a hulk as large as this one would normally have thousands of genestealers aboard it, and a battle on that scale would certainly have left far more evidence of itself than a single cadaver.

‘I don’t think so,’ I said, with a shake of my head. The genestealers had been quick enough to react to the presence of the Reclaimers and the tech-priests, and if the orks were being left alone it had to be for a reason. Once again, I found myself forced to consider that the brood mind was a more subtle and dangerous enemy than the waves of animalistic genestealers it controlled made it appear. ‘The ’stealers are up to something.’

Jurgen shrugged again. ‘Of course they are, sir. They’re xenos,’ he pointed out reasonably. ‘But if they’re concentrating on the orks instead of us, good luck to ’em.’

Well, those were sentiments I could hardly argue with, so I nodded instead, but kept my weapons handy nevertheless. Both xenos breeds were utterly inimical to humankind, and they were welcome to take lumps out of each other until there were none of either left standing so far as I was concerned; but my finely tuned sense of paranoia was convincing me that whichever side won, we’d lose.



Working our way round the greenskins' beachhead took just as long as I'd feared, and more than once I had cause to be grateful for the tanna flask and ration bars Jurgen had secreted about his person before leaving the safe haven of the *Revenant*.

Though necessary, each of these pauses for rest and refreshment were anxious ones, punctuated by glances at my chronograph, until even my most optimistic estimates of how long the Thunderhawk would remain waiting for survivors to straggle back to it had been long exceeded. But there was nowhere else to go that I could think of, so the hangar bay remained our objective. Even if the entire expedition had been massacred by the purestrains stalking it, I was pretty sure the Reclaimers and their allies in the Adeptus Mechanicus would be unwilling to leave the treasure trove of archeotech aboard the *Spawn of Damnation* alone for long, and it would only be a matter of time before they launched another attempt to loot the hulk. Which meant rescue would simply be a matter of waiting, and hoping we didn't succumb to starvation, the blades of the orks or the jaws of the genestealers, before they stopped dithering and got on with it. True, there was no guarantee that they'd make for the same docking bay again, but that was a possibility I didn't allow myself to dwell on for too long.

By the simple expedient of keeping the faint glow of the functioning luminators to our right, as it continued to seep through the labyrinth of passageways, ducts and conduits like the herald of dawn on some habitable world, we contrived to remain far enough from the main body of the greenskins to avoid ready detection, without deviating too far into the depths of the hulk again. On several occasions we were forced to seek refuge in some shadowy side turning, or behind some tumbled debris, by the approach of footsteps and the guttural barking of the greenskins' barbarous tongue, but orks and gretchin aren't exactly stealthy at the best of times, and Jurgen and I were able to conceal ourselves long before the risk of detection became a real possibility. Though all these parties were armed, the carrying of weapons being as natural as breathing to an ork, so far as I could see, without sticking my head out far enough to be noticed, they were being hefted in a distinctly casual manner, and I remarked as much to Jurgen, as the shrill squabbling voices of a gretchin scavenging party under the sullen supervision of an apprentice mek and a couple of bored-looking boyz<sup>138</sup> faded into the distance.

'I thought that too,' my aide confirmed, rekindling the lumina-  
tor attached

to the barrel of his lasgun once he was certain the greenskins were too far away to notice it. Although they were kind enough to let us know they were coming from scores of metres away, the genestealers were far less considerate, and neither of us felt particularly keen to be taken by surprise, the fate of Blain and his battle-brother still vivid in our memories. 'They can't expect to be running into any 'stealers this close to their camp.'

'I don't think they know about them at all,' I said, having had long enough to consider the matter to be fairly certain by now that my initial conclusion had been correct. 'They'd be moving a lot more carefully if they did.'

'Wouldn't whoever shot the one we found earlier have told them?' Jurgen asked, and I shook my head, forgetting for the moment that he couldn't have seen the gesture in the dark even if he hadn't been several paces ahead of me.

'They would if they made it back,' I said, having thought about this too, 'but I don't think they did. We only found one dead 'stealer, and they tend to hunt in packs. Look what happened to the Terminators.' If they'd been able to overwhelm such formidable warriors by sheer weight of numbers, a relatively unprotected ork would have had virtually no chance.

'Makes sense,' Jurgen agreed. 'If one or two went missing out of all that lot, no one'd notice.'

'I suppose not,' I said. If a recon patrol of Guardsmen disappeared, the entire garrison would be on alert within hours, and assiduous efforts made to either find them or determine their fate. But greenskins come and go on a whim, caring little or nothing for any of the others, and unless the genestealers' prey had been sent out on a specific errand by a nob further up the food chain,<sup>139</sup> it was indeed probable that their absence had gone unremarked. All of which merely confirmed the disquieting conclusion I'd already come to: the brood mind had a reason to keep the invaders ignorant of its presence aboard the space hulk. Try as I might, though, I just couldn't conceive of what that might be; and when I found out, I was going to wish devoutly that I'd remained in ignorance.



## TWENTY-ONE

Despite several close calls with wandering greenskins, we eventually made it to the far side of their enclave without serious incident; and I must say I felt a strong sense of relief as the last lingering glow of its luminators faded into the darkness at our backs. True, we were forfeiting whatever protection from the genestealers we'd been deriving from its proximity, but every step we now took brought us closer to our goal. We were still some appreciable distance from the Redeemer-class wreck we'd first boarded, which meant I was having to find our way purely by luck and by instinct. But my old underhiver's affinity for environments like this seemed as reliable as ever, and I was fairly confident that another couple of kilometres would bring us to the area I'd seen magnified in the hololith on the *Revenant's* bridge. Brief as that glimpse had been, what now felt like a lifetime ago, I was sure that once we reached the area it delineated I'd be able to recall enough detail to accelerate our progress considerably, so I pressed on as quickly as seemed prudent, as anxious to reach it as you might expect.

I was still more than aware of the danger from genestealers, of course, and kept my ears open for any tell-tale scrabbling in the darkness, but the further we got from the greenskins the more my spirits rose. At the very least, it meant we could concentrate on one threat at a time.

'We'll have to go back, sir,' Jurgen said, from a few metres in front, sounding no more discouraged than if he was letting me know that my morning tanna was going to be a few minutes late. 'It's a dead end.'

'Frak,' I said, feelingly. We'd been making good progress over the last half

hour or so, having hit on a relatively unobstructed passageway, but we'd passed few side turnings which looked passable, and none at all in the last ten minutes. To the best of my recollection, retracing our steps to a point where we could branch off with a reasonable chance of finding a parallel route would take us uncomfortably close to the orks again, not to mention losing rather more time than I felt we could afford.

I was about to turn away, when a faint, regular pattern flickered into view in the circle of light cast by Jurgen's luminator, all but obscured by the patina of rust and accumulated filth adhering to the metal wall in front of us. I moved closer and raised a hand to brush the worst of it away, rendering my glove almost as disreputable as my much-abused headgear in the process. 'Can you hold that light steady?'

'Of course, sir,' Jurgen replied, leaning a little closer to see what I was doing and bringing a strong blast of his unique aroma with him. Preoccupied, I barely noticed, tracing the faint Gothic lettering my efforts had made marginally more legible. 'What does it say?'

'Emergency bulkhead,' I picked out laboriously, in what had once been authoritative capitals, followed by a series of letters and numbers, presumably identifying the section of the vessel which lay beyond. 'It must have been tripped by whatever happened to the ship this once was.'

'Like the *Hand of Vengeance*,' Jurgen said, no doubt remembering the thick slab of metal which had slid into place to seal off the decompressing section we'd been trapped in when our transport ship had taken a hit off Perlia. I shuddered, the same recollection striking me. 'Can we get it open, then?'

'We can try,' I replied, a little dubiously. We'd manhandled plenty of obstructing hatches open on our unintended hike through the bowels of the space hulk already, but this one seemed heavier and more obdurate than most. I glanced around the litter of debris surrounding us. 'We'll need something to lever it open, though.'

Fortunately we found a metal bar some three metres in length, which seemed stout enough, after a few minutes of foraging, and I hefted it experimentally. 'This ought to do,' I concluded, returning to the obstacle, which Jurgen helpfully illuminated for me.

I examined the slab of metal carefully, searching for a suitable spot. There was no sign of a join down the middle, which meant it must have moved as a single piece. Not encouraging. I transferred my attention to the nearest

edge, finding only the narrowest of grooves where the bulkhead met the wall. It must retract into this side then, which would mean levering it from the other.

‘Frak,’ I said vehemently, discovering exactly the same thing after a cursory inspection on the other side of the corridor. ‘It must have come down from the ceiling.’

‘We won’t be shifting that, then,’ Jurgen said gloomily.

Even though the same thought had occurred to me, I shook my head. The sense of disappointment which had washed over me was abruptly pushed aside by a surge of anger, almost childish in its petulance, a fact I can only attribute to the hunger and exhaustion I’d been keeping at bay for some time now by willpower alone. I was damned if I was going to let a lump of scrap metal get the better of me now we’d come so close to our goal. ‘Wait a moment,’ I said, my voice sounding surprisingly level under the circumstances. ‘Let’s not give up just yet.’

I examined our surroundings in more detail, my eyes having long since adjusted to the level of light supplied by the Guard-issue luminator. It goes without saying, of course, that the decking under our feet had changed innumerable times since we set out on our interminable hike through the bowels of the *Spawn of Damnation*, from solid metal to mesh grating and back again, occasionally varied by way of carpeting, the odd slab of wood and, once, what seemed uncomfortably like bone.<sup>140</sup> Now we were standing once again on metal mesh, suspended a few centimetres above a gully running beneath the floor, through which cabling and pipework ran to mechanisms Emperor knew where, and which had no doubt ceased to function generations before.

I bent down and tugged hopefully at the section of mesh closest to the bulkhead; finding it sealed immovably into place by the rust of centuries, I gave up the subtle approach and freed it with a couple of swipes of my chainsword. The adamantium teeth ripped through the venerable metalwork within seconds, with a shower of sparks and a shriek which set my teeth on edge. After a few anxious moments, in which hordes of genestealers and curious orks failed to erupt from the shadows, I sheathed the weapon again, marvelling at my folly, which I can only attribute to the fatigue which was still threatening to overwhelm me.<sup>141</sup> The utility gully was too shallow to squeeze through, of course, but I found what I was looking for, and smiled; the thick metal slab was resting in a groove cut into the floor, running from

one wall to the other, lined by the decayed remnants of some flexible sheet material, no doubt intended to ensure an airtight seal. The rotting material had left a gap, into which I was able to thrust the end of the bar, and after a few moments of hopeful manipulation, I felt it catch against the underside of the lowered bulkhead.

‘So far, so good,’ I said, and the furrowing of Jurgen’s forehead dislodged some of the grime adhering to it. (Although, to be fair, I can’t have looked much cleaner myself by this point.)

‘We’ll never shift that with just the two us,’ he said reasonably, illustrating the point by leaning his entire weight on the raised end of the pole. Beyond a faint, protesting creak from the edge of the mesh deck plate now acting as a fulcrum, his efforts had no discernible effect whatsoever.

‘I know,’ I said, leading the way back to the debris-choked side passage where I’d found the bar. Part of the ceiling had given way here, Emperor alone knew how long ago, and there were plenty of pieces of sheet metal, cabling and general clutter left lying beneath it. Nothing short of the arrival of a ‘stealer swarm or an ork horde would have persuaded me to risk entering so obvious a death trap, but enough of the detritus was close enough to the main corridor to lay hold of without much danger to life and limb, and we’d soon accumulated a collection which would have netted us a small fortune if we’d been able to get it to a downhive trading post somewhere.

A few more moments of perspiration and profanity were enough to transfer our hoard to the barrier blocking our progress, and I looped some of the electrical cable I’d scavenged around the top of the bar, knotting it as securely as I could, before repeating the operation at right angles to the first. That left two loops crossing one another, hanging from the end, and I lost no time in wedging a flat sheet of metal into them, creating a short, but relatively stable, platform. After that, it was simply a matter of wedging the largest chunk of debris under the jutting pole, to create a higher fulcrum than before, and beginning to load the rest of the scrap onto the high end. I was just beginning to doubt that it would work after all when, with a heart-stopping groan, the whole thing shifted several centimetres, and I tensed, on the verge of leaping for my life. After an anxious second or two, I became convinced that it wasn’t going to collapse and, somewhat nervously, resumed piling debris onto the makeshift counterweight.

‘It’s working, sir!’ Jurgen said, unmistakably pleased, despite his habitual

lack of excitement. But that was fine; I was anxious enough for the pair of us.

‘Last piece,’ I said, wondering if I was going to have to go back for more ballast, but the last lump of scrap was enough. With another shriek of ancient metal against metal, the whole mess tilted, raising the thick metal slab blocking our way about half a metre above the deck plates.

‘It’s open,’ Jurgen told me, as though I might somehow have failed to notice, and ducked to shine the beam of his luminator through the gap. The bulkhead turned out to be around thirty centimetres thick, and I marvelled at our good fortune in being able to shift it at all; had I realised quite how great its mass was, I suspect, I wouldn’t have bothered even making the attempt. Jurgen sniffed the air beyond it suspiciously. ‘It smells a bit,’ he reported, as oblivious as ever to the irony, ‘but it’s breathable.’

‘Good,’ I said, dropping to crawl under the suspended slab of metal in my turn. I must admit to a strong sense of apprehension as I passed beneath it, but as I stood and surveyed our surroundings, that was replaced by a rush of elated relief. We’d overcome the obstacle after all, and although doing so had cost us a fair amount of time, it was still far less than we’d have squandered retracing our steps and looking for an alternative route. To say nothing of the risk of running into the orks.

The passageway here was just as clear and uncluttered as it had been on the other side of the bulkhead, and I breathed a silent sigh of relief. It seemed I’d made the right decision after all. As I inhaled again, I noticed a faint tang in the air I couldn’t quite identify, but which made my palms itch nevertheless. Suddenly, although nothing had changed, the shadows surrounding us seemed deeper, more threatening, and I urged Jurgen into motion again. ‘Come on,’ I said. ‘The sooner we’re out of here the better.’

If anything, however, my sense of unease grew ever stronger as we pressed on, despite the fact that we seemed to be making good progress. I started to hear the muffled scrabbling sounds I’d learned to associate with prowling genestealers again, and urged Jurgen to halt on several occasions while I tried to pinpoint the source. Every time I did, though, the sinister susurrations either faded away entirely, or echoed so much that I found myself unable to narrow it down. In the end I just determined to proceed as cautiously as possible, and trust my instincts to warn us of any ambush ahead. But when an attack did come, it was in a form it had never occurred

to me to expect.

‘There’s an open space up ahead,’ I told Jurgen, as quietly as I could, after another nerve-shredding half-hour or so had passed. The echoes of our footfalls and the air currents against my face felt different, and the odd, faintly acidic tang in the air seemed a little stronger now.

‘The hangar?’ my aide asked, and I shook my head.

‘Fraid not. We’re still a good couple of hours from that. Probably a hold.’ I’m no expert on starship construction, of course, but I’d travelled on enough of them over the years to be fairly certain that the wreck we were currently picking our way through was a bulk cargo hauler of some kind – or at least it had been, before some catastrophe had overwhelmed it, leaving it marooned in the warp until the capricious currents of that hellish realm had washed it up against the *Spawn of Damnation*. The sounds in the dark around us were growing louder and more numerous now, and I drew my weapons again, tension winding tighter in the pit of my stomach. For a moment I considered ordering Jurgen to extinguish the luminator, but the ‘stealers seemed to have no use for light, so I didn’t suppose it would attract their attention any more than the sound and scent of us would.<sup>142</sup> As I’ve remarked before, I’ve generally found it helpful to be able to see anything trying to kill me.

‘You’re right, sir,’ Jurgen told me, a few moments later, the beam of his luminator picking out an open door in one of the walls of the corridor. As we passed it the pervasive smell grew stronger, and I glanced through the portal, regretting the impulse at once; the space beyond was vast, and the floor so packed with the inert bodies of genestealers, their four arms curled protectively around their thoraxes, that not a millimetre of metal was visible.

‘Are they dead?’ Jurgen asked, and I shook my head, too shocked to speak for a moment.

‘No,’ I whispered at last, backing away fearfully, expecting the whole nest to rouse and tear us apart at any moment. I’d had merely the briefest of glimpses, but there must have been at least a thousand of the abominable creatures in there, probably more if I could be bothered with a proper headcount. ‘Just dormant.’ I tried desperately to remember the files Gries had shown me. ‘The ones who attacked us before must have been revived to protect the others.’<sup>143</sup>

Which meant we were in a very uncomfortable position indeed. I glanced



round again, alert for any sign of movement, and withdrew to the far side of the corridor. We had to go on, there was no question of that, but the thought of those monstrosities at our backs was a terrifying one.

‘Do we turn round?’ Jurgen asked, and I shook my head slowly.

‘No,’ I said. The chances of running into an active ‘stealer or two would be just as great whichever direction we took, and at least the hangar was a definite objective, as opposed to wandering around in the dark waiting to be torn to pieces.

‘Very good, sir,’ my aide replied, his matter-of-fact demeanour as obscurely heartening as it usually was in a crisis, and I felt a measure of confidence beginning to return. After all, the purestrains behind us were all dormant, so unless we did something catastrophically stupid to rouse them...

The distinctive *hisssss... crack!* of a bolter round impacting a few feet to my left, blowing a fist-sized hole in the metal wall beside me, galvanised me into action, and I brought my laspistol up in the direction it had come from, returning fire instinctively as I dived for cover. Jurgen responded too, the beam of his luminator picking out the distinctive lumpen profile of an ork as he brought his lasgun on aim. The greenskin ducked back behind a stanchion, as las-bolts peppered the metalwork around him, and I began to pick out other shapes moving in the shadows beyond.

‘Pull back,’ I ordered, trying to get an estimate of their numbers. This was hardly the best place to start a firefight, as I strongly suspected the genestealers would be rather cranky on first waking, and we were making a considerable amount of noise between us already.

‘Right you are, sir,’ Jurgen agreed, with a trace of reluctance, eager as any Valhallan to be killing orks, but this was hardly the time or place to indulge him. There seemed to be a dozen or so greenskins lurking in the darkness ahead of us, and a couple more of them began to shoot as well, though fortunately with no more luck than the first one was already having. ‘They’re trying to keep our heads down.’

‘And they’re succeeding,’ I said testily, as a couple of heavy slugs ricocheted from the edge of the shrine to the Omnissiah atop the tool locker behind which I’d found refuge.

‘Getting ready to charge, most likely,’ Jurgen reminded me, a tactic we’d become more than familiar with on our Perlian odyssey, and I nodded grimly.

‘Wait until they move,’ I told him, unnecessarily, given how conversant he was with the best tactics to use against the creatures, and he nodded too, flicking the fire selector of his lasgun to full auto.

Without any further warning, a staccato rhythm of metal-soled boots began ringing off the deck plates, and a small knot of greenskins charged, brandishing the crude axes so many of them tend to favour in close combat. As they bore down on our position, a sense of foreboding washed over me; something was definitely not right about this. (Apart from the obvious point of an enraged mob of orks wanting to hack us to shreds, of course.) Then the hairs on the back of my neck began to prickle, as realisation dawned: the greenskins were running towards us in complete silence, none of them having made a sound since the skirmish began. On every other occasion I’d encountered them, they’d bellowed warcries, threats and exhortations to one another even before combat was joined, not to mention yelling their lungs out for as long as it continued, and they remained in any condition to do so.

‘Don’t let them get near you!’ I yelled, as if Jurgen had been planning to offer them tanna and a florn cake, and he opened up at the same instant I did, spitting a fusillade of las-bolts down the corridor. There was no point in worrying about the genestealers in the hold now; the brood mind already knew precisely where we were, a deduction confirmed an instant later by a barely perceptible shifting in the shadows behind the orks with guns. Expecting to see something of the kind, I recognised it at once for what it was: a purestrain ’stealer, observing the actions of its implanted puppets with dispassionate interest.

‘Grenade!’ Jurgen yelled, lobbing another of the frag charges down the corridor, where it landed just ahead of the charging greenskins neat as you please. Both of us turned to run as it detonated, the concussion echoing in the confined space like an Earthshaker firing, and the pressure wave slammed into our backs as we took to our heels. The onrushing orks faltered, the leading ones shredded by the hail of shrapnel, and those behind either sufficiently incommoded by it or impeded by the resulting mess to allow us to open up a lead I hoped would prove sufficient.

‘There was a genestealer with them,’ I panted, praying that it would be prevented from pursuing us immediately by the tangle of perforated orks blocking the passage. We stood a reasonable chance of staying ahead of the lumbering greenskins for a while, until their greater endurance started to tell, but I was under no illusions about being able to outrun a purestrain.

Jurgen nodded. ‘Saw it too,’ he confirmed, before another bolt detonated uncomfortably close behind us; the phenomenal resilience of the orks was already allowing at least some of them to recover from the explosion.

We both turned, directing another hail of unaimed las-bolts back in their general direction, with the vague hope of putting them even more off their aim than usual, and for a second the air in my lungs seemed to freeze solid. Most of the las-bolts were impacting on the thorax of another genestealer, which had just entered the corridor from the cargo hold. It was moving sluggishly, rather than with the blinding speed and agility I usually associated with the creatures, and went down without even an attempt at seeking cover, but I knew we wouldn’t be so lucky again. Even over the sounds of combat, and the ringing of our bootheels on the deck plates, I was beginning to hear a rustling, faint at first, like the wind in a forest, gradually rising to a muted roar, which reminded me uncomfortably of the tidal bore which had almost swept me to my death on Rikenbach. (And taken the feet out from under the heretic Dreadnought I’d been running away from at the time, luckily for me; I’d eventually washed up half-drowned on a sandspit, while our Hydra battery chewed it to pieces before it managed to get up again.<sup>144</sup>)

‘The whole nest’s reviving!’<sup>145</sup> I shouted, finding I could run a little faster after all. The distinctive *click-scratch* of talons on metal echoed all around us, and I risked a quick glance back, regretting it at once. The pursuing ‘stealers weren’t just racing along the floor of the passageway, they were moving just as fast along the ceiling and the walls, their claws ripping purchase even from apparently smooth surfaces. The resulting fast-moving constriction in the dimensions of the corridor, beyond which more purestrains and a few implanted orks could be intermittently glimpsed, made it look uncannily as though Jurgen and I were being swallowed – an impression I found about as comforting as you might expect. The creatures were still moving a little more sluggishly than usual, true, but they were gaining nevertheless, and I found myself trying to estimate just how long it was going to be before I felt claws in the back of my neck. The only result I could come up with was not nearly long enough, which was hardly helpful. The side passages we passed were choked with debris, and attempting to find refuge in any of them would be futile, simply slowing us down enough for the horrors in pursuit to catch up even more quickly.

As the breath began to rasp in my throat, made even worse by the dust our

headlong dash was raising from the metal mesh at our feet, I sent a few las-bolts into the darkness at our backs entirely at random. The chances of an effective hit were minimal, true, but I was almost bound to strike something among so dense a concentration of xenos flesh, and even a token effort to fend them off fostered the comforting illusion that there might still be some action I could take to avoid a fate which now seemed inevitable.

Then, just as everything seemed lost, I felt a sudden flare of hope rise within me, as the beam of Jurgen's luminator picked out the rust-pitted surface of the bulkhead we'd so laboriously levered open, no more than a couple of hundred metres ahead of us. If we could only buy ourselves a few more precious seconds to reach it, before the onrushing horde reached us instead...

I risked another glance behind, to find that the swarm had closed the distance more rapidly than even my most pessimistic estimate; the recently roused genestealers were clearly feeling rather more chipper now, probably at the prospect of breakfast. We'd never even make it as far as the barrier at this rate, let alone manage to wriggle through the narrow gap beneath it, before we were overwhelmed.

The recently kindled flame of hope guttered and subsided, but I refused to let it be extinguished entirely. 'Jurgen!' I bellowed, over the rising noise behind us, and for a brief, hallucinatory moment, tasted seawater again. 'Any grenades left?'

'A couple, sir,' Jurgen said, rummaging through his collection of pouches. 'Frag or krak?'

'Frag!' I shouted, hoping he wouldn't take it for stress-induced profanity.

'Right you are, sir,' my aide responded, imperturbable as ever, and produced one with the air of having performed a successful conjuring trick. In a single deft movement, he primed and lobbed it over his shoulder, not bothering to look or care where it landed. In truth, neither did I. I heard the casing clatter resonantly against the metal mesh of the deck, felt my shoulder muscles tense instinctively for the shock of detonation, and hoped to the Throne that we'd be out of its area of effect by the time the hail of shrapnel was released. A second or two later I was punched hard in the back by a large, hot fist, and risked a glance behind us, being rewarded with a confused impression of thrashing limbs and tails receding further with each footstep I took. There was no time to see more, as we'd reached the bulkhead at last, and, praise the Emperor, it was still precariously raised by

our makeshift lever.

Hearing the renewed skitter of fast-approaching claws, I lost no time in scrabbling under the thick metal slab, while Jurgen did his best to discourage the swarm with a final burst of his lasgun through the firing slit the gap created.

‘Through you come, sir,’ he said encouragingly, grabbing my forearm and yanking me the rest of the way, like a recalcitrant cork from a bottle. I half-slid into the utility conduit, where we’d removed the covering mesh, before recovering my balance, barking my shin painfully on the edge of the next section of deck plating as I did so.

‘Thank you, Jurgen,’ I said, turning to swipe the blade of my chainsword at the excessively clawed arm groping through the gap after me. The limb parted and fell into the channel beneath the deck plates, but if I knew ‘stealers that wasn’t going to be enough to discourage its owner from following, let alone its brood mates, so I turned, and severed the length of pipe holding the bulkhead up with a single stroke of the whirling blade. The thick slab of metal fell with gratifying speed, and a thud which made the deck plates shudder beneath our feet, crushing the first purestrains which were trying to follow us in the process. A couple of heads, an assortment of limbs and a generous dollop of mashed torso slithered down into the gully in the wake of the arm I’d cut off, making an unholy mess of my boots as they did so.

‘That ought to hold ‘em,’ Jurgen said, an unmistakable note of satisfaction suffusing his voice, and I nodded, drawing deep draughts of the foetid air into my lungs to slow my hammering heart. The narrowness of our escape finally sank in, and I sat on the pile of scrap we’d used as a counterweight a little more heavily than I’d intended, heedless of the damage it was doing to my greatcoat. Right now I could hardly look much more dishevelled than I already did in any case.

‘For a while,’ I agreed, as a faint rasping began behind the bulkhead, and I belatedly realised that creatures capable of ripping Terminator armour apart weren’t likely to be held back for very long by a mere few centimetres of steel. I regained my feet, having got enough of my breath back to start running again if I had to. ‘Come on.’ I started to lead the way down the tunnel.

‘Won’t that take us straight back to the orks?’ Jurgen asked, falling in at my shoulder, and I nodded.

‘I hope so,’ I told him, ignoring the familiar expression of puzzlement falling across his features like a waning moon. ‘Right now, they look like the best chance we’ve got.’

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## TWENTY-TWO

Though we were retracing our steps exactly, it seemed to take far less time to get back to the enclave of the orks than it had done to cover the same distance in the opposite direction. Partly, I suppose, that must have been due to our familiarity with the terrain; heading away from it we'd been checking for unexpected hazards the whole way, whereas now we were able to place our feet with confidence, certain we weren't about to be pitched through some weakened section of flooring to the deck below, like the damaged CAT we'd got into this mess in the first place by attempting to recover. Mainly, however, I think it was due to us knowing all too well what we were heading towards.

As we passed the tunnel mouths I'd considered going back to in search of an alternative route when we'd first found our way blocked by the bulkhead, I had to exert all the willpower I possessed not to turn aside in the hope of being able to bypass the genestealer nest and attempt to reach the hangar again. The only thing that stopped me was the realisation that it would be impossible to evade the creatures now. The brood mind had become aware of our presence, and I was certain that the malignant mass of the creatures we'd stumbled across would be diffusing itself through every corridor, duct and passageway by this time, effectively isolating us from our goal, while hunting us down deck by deck. Our only chance, slender as it was, would be to give it something else to think about – which is where the orks came in.

Seeing the implanted ones among the swarm had pretty much confirmed

the deduction I'd made about the brood mind's reasons for leaving the great mass of them in ignorance of the presence of genestealers aboard the *Spawn of Damnation*. The first few it had taken would have left it in no doubt of the single-minded viciousness of the species, and that any attempt to confront so many of them directly would have left the 'stealers in poor shape to continue spreading their blight through the galaxy, if any had survived at all. Far better to continue lurking in the shadows, picking off a few of the interlopers here and there, until the greenskins' warhost was thoroughly infiltrated and its ability to fight off the swarm had been critically compromised. In the meantime, it would get to invade Serendipita by proxy, through implanted and hybridised orks, who would spread the genestealer taint wherever they went, no doubt taking as many of the purestrains as they could along for the ride. And while they got on with that, the ork horde would be giving the defenders of the system more than enough to think about, allowing the 'stealers to start polluting the gene pool of Serendipita's human inhabitants unnoticed and unopposed.

The only way I could see to prevent that, and, more importantly, save my own skin, was to turn the brood mind's own tactics against it. Something easier said than done, of course, but my instinctive affinity for enclosed spaces and remaining orientated within them had given me the germ of an idea. A fairly nebulous one, it's true, the only part I was certain about being a great deal of running, but it was better than nothing. Thus it was, far too soon for comfort, I found myself skulking through the lit corridors of the section the orks had colonised again, hoping we were in the right area and that we wouldn't come across too many of the inhabitants before we were ready.

However, it seemed that the Emperor was with us once more, the creatures' habitual bellicosity and flatulence combining to produce more than enough audible warning of their presence for Jurgan and I to find concealment in time to escape notice. Before too long we found ourselves looking out for the second time over the vast metal cavern which their relentless energy and destructiveness had wrenched from the fabric of the space hulk.

Fortunately, my sense of direction hadn't let me down, and we'd arrived more or less where I'd hoped we would, overlooking the smoke-shrouded section where the mekboyz toiled, creating weapons and ammunition to lay waste to Serendipita. Even at this distance I could feel the heat from the



roaring forges, and hear the clank of tools from the decks below us where gangs of gretchin riggers were scavenging fresh raw material for the furnaces. Between the murk and the heat haze it was hard to make out much detail, but the little I could was more than enough.

Almost immediately below us was an area devoted to the construction of battlewagons: mobile weapon platforms bristling with weapons, which I recognised from Perlia. No two were alike, of course, but I'd faced them often enough to know how hard they could be to knock out without armour support, and hoped Torven and Kregeen would be able to scrape up a fair number of tanks between them. There were plenty of smaller trucks about as well, armed too, of course, but for the moment at least being used to shift supplies about from one end of the cavern to the other. (And for all I knew, the orkish mindset being what it was, back again, just for the fun of charging around at life-threatening speeds.) In the middle distance was a latticework of scaffolding, where the minuscule figures of innumerable gretchin were swarming over a vast pile of scrap, which looked alarmingly like a half-completed gargant; but that, at least, would be a problem for later, and preferably somebody else.

'Those look like promethium tanks,' I said, nudging Jurgen and pointing to a cluster of domed cylinders on the periphery of the vehicle assembly area. 'Can you read the glyphs?'

My aide nodded and squinted a little, trying to bring the crudely daubed symbols on the sides of the tank into focus through the smoke-stained air. 'Looks like a warning,' he said at last. 'Fire, or burn, and *zogoff*.'<sup>146</sup>

'Excellent,' I said, my guess confirmed. 'Do you think you can hit it from here?'

'I reckon so,' Jurgen said, peering through the sights of his lasgun. 'It's a long shot, but at least there's no windage to worry about.' He steadied his breathing, lining the shot up carefully, and fired once. I strained my eyes, but the distance and the obscuring murk were too great, and I could see no sign of the impact. 'Bit to the left.' He repeated the process, to no apparent effect, then tried a third time. I was just on the point of giving up and trying to find an alternative target, when my aide grunted with satisfaction. 'That ought to do it.'

'Did you hit the tank?' I asked, still waiting for some kind of visible effect with a sense of vague disappointment. I suppose I was hoping for something like the inferno which had engulfed the refuelling station in

Prosperity Wells,<sup>147</sup> although that had been sparked by a krak round from a rocket launcher, rather than the feeble punch of a lasgun fired from far beyond its normal effective range.

Jurgen shook his head. 'The tank?' he echoed, looking puzzled, although that was nothing new. 'I was shooting at the outlet valve.' Squinting in the direction of the blocky cylinders, I was just able to make out some minute protrusions where a cluster of pipes joined the assembly. It may have been my imagination, but the haze seemed a little thicker there, and I thought I could make out the shimmer of liquid gushing from the nearest one, to form an ever-growing pool.

'That would work much better,' I assured him, marvelling, not for the first time, at his standard of marksmanship. To hit so small a target at this range would have involved a fair degree of luck as well, of course, but I wasn't going to turn my nose up at that either. 'Well done.'

'You're welcome, sir,' Jurgen said, allowing a faint air of satisfaction to enter his voice, then nodded judiciously. 'Just give it another moment to let the fumes build.' He sighted down the lasgun again. 'Only needs a little spark...'

He squeezed the trigger, and I stared at the fuel dump, hopeful anticipation narrowing my eyes. Where the shot hit, I had no idea, but the las-bolt must have struck metal, producing the spark Jurgen had wished for. For the briefest of instants nothing seemed to happen, then a bright orange flare blossomed from nowhere, racing through the air as it expanded, to engulf the entire complex.

'Good shot!' I started to say, then everything was drowned out by a thunderclap which left my ears ringing, the sound rebounding and redoubling in the confined space. A lake of liquid fire poured through the assembly area, washing over the newly completed battlewagons, immolating orks and gretchin by the hundred in the process. A couple of trucks on the fringes of the mekboyz' compound turned and raced away, trying to outrun the spreading flames; one made it to safety, while the other was overtaken and engulfed, its own fuel combusting in a miniature echo of the main fireball, all but lost in the general conflagration.

'That went well,' Jurgen said, sounding distinctly pleased with himself, over the rolling boom of a succession of secondary explosions, as the ammunition aboard the burning battlewagons began to cook off. I found myself wondering where the main munitions dumps were, and whether

we'd perhaps overdone it a little. I'd been hoping to get the orks' attention, not wipe them out entirely.

Well, that wasn't going to happen, of course. Despite the vista of destruction spreading out beneath our feet, the greater part of the greenskins' colony had been left untouched. Tearing my eyes from the inferno we'd unleashed, I was gratified to see them charging around in even greater disarray than usual, while bellowing nobz<sup>148</sup> attempted to restore order with about as much success as you might expect. The warboss we'd seen before was forging his way through the milling throng, cracking heads and roaring at anything unfortunate enough to cross his path, and I gave Jurgen a nudge. This was too good an opportunity to miss. 'Isn't that the one you wanted to take a crack at the last time?' I asked.

'Looks like it,' Jurgen agreed, taking the hint and lining up another shot. It was too much to hope that he'd be able to drop the leader of the host from here (although given the devastation he'd already managed to wreak with just a few las-rounds I wouldn't have been all that surprised if he took the brute cleanly between the eyes), but I had another objective in mind in any case. 'Frak. Just winged him.'

The warboss looked up, snarling, as Jurgen's las-bolt impacted on the left shoulder plate of his armour, adding another barely visible dent to the impressive collection already decorating it, to glare furious hatred in our direction. Which was precisely what I'd hoped for. I stepped to the very brink of the vertiginous drop at the end of the abbreviated corridor, heedless of the suffocating heat rising from the inferno below, and flourished my chainsword, locking gazes over the intervening distance. It was a gesture I knew no greenskin would be able to interpret in any manner other than a challenge, and I was right; with a bellow of rage, inaudible over the roaring of the flames, and the cacophonous collapse of the partially completed gargant as the supporting scaffold softened in the furnace heat, he began running in our direction, skirting the inferno as closely as he could. His bodyguard came with him, of course, and, true to the mob mentality which seemed to govern all these creatures' actions, every other ork in the vicinity trailed along behind. Even from this distance, and over the deafening clamour of the destruction we'd unleashed, I could hear the rising communal shout of 'WAAAAAAGGHHHHH!' which betokened their unleashed bloodlust.

'Time we were going,' I said, estimating how long it would take for them

to reach us. Several minutes, at least, but they wouldn't be expecting us to hang about either. As they climbed the intervening levels they'd be fanning out through them too, hoping to get ahead and cut us off. Which might even have worked, if there hadn't been a swarm of genestealers on our heels already, no doubt hoping to repeat the trick in the other direction.

For want of any better idea, I hurried back in the direction of the branching corridors which had attracted my attention on our way in, hoping the genestealers wouldn't have advanced that far by now. I was fairly sure they'd continue to avoid the orkish enclave, as penetrating its perimeter would reveal their presence, effectively frakking up their plan to use the greenskins for their own ends; but the orks must be spreading out too by now, maddened by bloodlust and the desire for revenge, and with any luck the two groups would encounter one another before either caught up with us. Of course that raised the interesting question of how we were going to slip through a minor war without being caught in the crossfire, but I'd worry about that when the time came.

In the event, however, it wasn't the 'stealers or the orks which found us first. We were still well inside the illuminated area when a pattering of running feet on the deck plates behind us snatched at my attention, and I whirled round to find the corridor choked with gretchin, charging towards us with shrill squeals of malevolent glee, urged on by the roaring bulk of their orkish overseer. Just our luck: they must have been foraging in this part of the wreck when we blew up the fuel dump, noticed the commotion, and got caught up in the general bloodlust.

'I'll take the big one!' I shouted, placing a couple of las-bolts from my pistol in the centre of the ork's chest, which, given how much he towered over the grotz<sup>149</sup> was hardly a difficult test of my marksmanship. He staggered, but rallied, and would probably have charged me if it hadn't been for the milling mass of smaller greenskins clustered around his feet. Jurgen thinned them out nicely with a couple of bursts from his lasgun, leaving the rest to decide they were more scared of us than the ork, and scatter squealing. Finding the way unexpectedly clear, the ork began to charge forwards, a club the thickness of my forearm raised to strike; but I was ready for him, and ducked under it, the edge of my chainsword chewing through his torso in a rising horizontal cut. Bellowing in surprise and outrage, the hulking greenskin tried to turn for another go, before the realisation that he'd been almost bisected finally sank in, and he toppled to

the deck plates, staring in stupefaction at his widely distributed entrails.

‘That was easy,’ Jurgen remarked, and I nodded, flicking the speed setting of the chainsword back to idle. I suspected I’d be needing it a lot more in the next few hours, if I managed to last that long, and didn’t want to find the powerpack depleted when I did.

‘Better make the most of it,’ I advised. ‘Things are going to get a bit trickier from now on.’

In that expectation, I was far from disappointed. By the time we’d reached the relative sanctuary of the darkened corridors again, we’d seen off another half-dozen orks, in twos and threes,<sup>150</sup> the first few of the mob hunting us to make it into these upper levels. But I knew there were bound to be more, hard on their heels, and I began to wonder about the wisdom of the course of action I’d begun.

Well, it was too late for second thoughts, of course. By now we were almost at the first of the side tunnels I’d been making for, and I picked up my pace a little, conscious that the genestealers would almost certainly have ripped their way through the bulkhead by this time, and could be skittering towards us from out of the darkness as fast as their six limbs could carry them. If they hadn’t already got this far, and were now lurking in ambush, of course, or others of their kind hadn’t found their way here by another route. I listened carefully, alert for any hint of scuttling in the gloom around us, but what I could hear over the hammering of my heart was too faint and diffuse to pinpoint.

No point worrying then, I told myself, before a barely perceptible change in the quality of the darkness enfolding us started tickling at the edge of my awareness. ‘Kill the luminator,’ I instructed Jurgen. Responsive as ever to orders he complied immediately, and I realised at once that I was right. There was a faint glow behind us, growing in intensity moment by moment, and as I strained my ears I was able to make out the irregular drumming of a large number of fast-moving feet. A moment later it was joined by the timbre of guttural voices, quarrelsomely raised, which dispelled any possible doubt there might have been about who they belonged to. ‘This way! And try to stay quiet.’

The last admonition may not have been strictly necessary, I suppose, as the oncoming orks would almost certainly have drowned out any noise we might be making with their interminable bickering, but it never hurt to be careful. Besides, I hadn’t forgotten that the genestealers were somewhere

around too, and were probably listening out for us with just as much energy and interest as I was for them. Fortunately I'd memorised the position of the cross corridor we'd been aiming for before our luminator went out, and a few strides were sufficient to take me there; my nose enabled me to fix Jurgen's location just as easily, and guide him in the right direction too, so that by the time the diffuse glow behind us separated into a score of distinct light sources, the pair of us were comfortably ensconced behind a large lump of rust a few metres into the passageway, which looked as though it had once been a pump of some kind. From there we had a good view of the corridor we'd just left, so I hunkered down, my laspistol at the ready, and peered round the defunct mechanism, hoping to see enough to get an estimate of the size of the group behind us.

In the event, I was to see a great deal more than that. As the orks approached the junction, and Jurgen and I steadied our weapons, preparing to drop any which split off from the main body to explore our refuge, the light around us grew brighter with every step closer the greenskins took. As yet, although they were more than audible, the pursuing orks had still to become visible; the pump behind which Jurgen and I were lurking was on the side of the passageway they were approaching from, so the view we had of the main corridor was up towards the genestealer nest we'd stumbled across what felt like a lifetime ago, but which my chronograph stubbornly insisted had been barely an hour and a half.

I centred the junction of the two passageways in my sights, and blinked, thinking for a moment that fatigue and stress had finally caught up with me. The shadows were shrinking and deepening as the luminator-bearing greenskins approached, but one had appeared to ripple, moving in the wrong direction, before settling again, somewhere in a tangle of pipework depending from the ceiling.

My breath froze. 'Stealer,' I whispered, almost inaudibly, not daring to raise my voice any louder in case the chitinous obscenity heard me. 'In the main passage.'

'I make it three,' Jurgen responded, equally *sotto voce*, an instant after I spotted the others, clinging to the wall beside a ventilator grille a little above eye level, and lurking in the utility channel beneath the mesh deck plate. Then more shadows rippled, and a whole swarm of them was suddenly there, blocking the passageway entirely, just as the vanguard of the orks came pounding into view from the other direction.

I suppose humans in that position might have hesitated, paralysed for a moment by surprise or indecision, but both xenos breeds were governed by an instinctive aggression which generally served them well in such encounters. With a bone-rattling yell of 'WAAAAAGGHHH!' the greenskins surged forwards, firing their crude bolters and swinging their axe blades, and the purestrains flowed to meet them, meeting firearm with mandible, edged steel with claw. Blood and ichor flowed, neither side willing or capable of giving quarter, each equally determined to annihilate the other.

'Come on,' I instructed, leaving them to it and hurrying down the passageway as quickly as I could without breaking an ankle on some unseen obstruction. After barking my shins on pieces of scrap littering the place a couple of times, I told Jurgen to rekindle the luminator; after all, the orks were using them too, and wouldn't be able to tell us from allies at a distance, and I was already convinced the 'stealers would be able to find us just as easily whether we were using one or not. The noise of the skirmish behind us was drowning out any warning my ears might have given of purestrains lurking in ambush, so, like it or not, we had no option other than relying on our vision in any case.

'Sounds like they're all at it,' Jurgen observed, sounding no more concerned than if he'd been informing me that rain was expected by evening, and I nodded in agreement. Sporadic shooting and orkish war cries could be heard echoing down the shafts from every direction now, and it became clear to me that perhaps we wouldn't find a way out after all. My gift for remaining orientated in environments like this still seemed as reliable as ever, but it appeared the way back to the hangar was now blocked by two hordes of inimical xenofoms hell-bent on knocking the proverbial nine shades out of one another. If there was anything at all positive about the situation, I supposed, it was that the greenskins were now well and truly aware of the genestealer presence, which meant neither would have much time or attention to spare for launching an attack on Serendipita any time soon. This may have been gravy for the Serendipitans, but wasn't much help to me.

'Let's try this way,' I said, spotting lights moving up ahead, and turning aside down a passageway which looked, if anything, even more decrepit and dangerous than the one we'd just left. A flicker of motion caught the corner of my eye, and I turned, bringing up my chainsword instinctively,

powering the teeth up to combat speed. Yet again, my duellist's reflexes saved my life, as the blade sliced cleanly through the arm of a genestealer millimetres from closing its claws around my head, and I pivoted out of the way of its rush, decapitating it neatly on the backswing. As it fell I looked around for more, but this one seemed to have been alone, much to my relief.

Any respite could only be temporary, however; I had no doubt that the brood mind was aware of our location now, and would be sending more of the creatures after us. All we could do was keep moving, and hope the orks were keeping the rest of the 'stealers in the vicinity occupied. At which point I became aware of the lights in the distance again, following us down the side passage we'd taken. It seemed they'd noticed us at the same time we'd seen them.

'Keep moving,' I said urgently. 'As fast as possible.'

'Right you are, sir,' Jurgen said, suiting the action to the word and breaking into an ungainly trot. It seemed we'd passed into yet another section of the hulk, in greater disrepair than the old freighter and whatever vessel the orks had been cannibalising had been. The corridor was narrow, and the floor plates badly corroded. The ubiquitous dust being kicked up by my hurrying footsteps was stained brown with rust here, and flakes of the stuff came off the walls every time my shoulders brushed against them. Loops of cable hung like jungle vines from the ceiling, where the brackets holding them in place had worked loose, or fallen away entirely, and for a moment I found myself wondering if we could somehow emulate Mira's trick with the power lines back on the *Revenant*, but the generators which used to feed them had ceased to function centuries ago, if not millennia, and even if they hadn't I'd probably just have ended up electrocuting myself in any case.

'It's a dead end,' Jurgen called, flashing his luminator round a rubble-choked chamber, which, judging by the control lecterns and the glass-fronted dials set into the walls, had probably once been a monitoring chapel for the ship's power core. There was no other way out that I could see, and I expressed my disappointment in several short phrases I think it best not to record for posterity. 'Can we go back the way we came?'

'If we clear the orks out of the way first,' I said, indicating the brightening glow some way off down the passageway.

Jurgen took cover behind a chunk of fallen ceiling, his lasgun aimed at the narrow entrance. 'Not a problem,' he assured me.



‘Glad to hear it,’ I said, hoping he wasn’t being overly optimistic. It sounded like a fair-sized mob to me, and, although they could only enter the chamber one at a time, I’d fought greenskins too often to be sanguine about our ability to drop them all as they came in. I’d seen orks shrugging off lasgun wounds which would have killed or incapacitated a man, and it would only take a few of them to rush us in so confined a space before we were overwhelmed. ‘Got any grenades left?’

‘Sorry, sir.’ Jurgen shook his head dolefully. ‘We’ve used the last one.’<sup>151</sup>

‘Oh well,’ I said, trying to sound casual. ‘Can’t be helped. We’ll just have to do the best we can.’ I popped off a few speculative las-bolts down the passageway, hoping to delay our pursuers, or goad them into doing something rash, but all I received for my pains was an answering flurry of bolter rounds, which punched holes in the metal walls surrounding us with a ripple of overlapping detonations which made my ears ring. That sparked another idea, and I scurried over to the walls, examining the damage. If the metal was thin enough, I might be able to cut us an exit with my chainsword, while Jurgen kept the greenskins at bay.

The hope was a forlorn one, though; a brief inspection was enough to convince me I’d never be able to slice through it in time, even if the teeth of my weapon didn’t break in the attempt. What really made me decide against trying, however, was the flicker of movement I glimpsed through the nearest hole. I sprang back reflexively, as a claw a good thirty centimetres long poked through the aperture and wriggled around experimentally. After a moment it withdrew, then reappeared again, along with its four companions, punching through the metal as though it were cardboard. Slowly they drew together as the ’stealer beyond the wall closed its fist, the metal crumpling like the foil of a ration pack, then withdrew, ripping away an entire handful, to leave a hole roughly the size of my head.

‘The ’stealers are coming through the walls!’ I warned Jurgen, as a mouth with far too many fangs snapped at the gap, just failing to force its way inside. I fired my laspistol at it from point-blank range, and it withdrew in a spray of foul-smelling ichor, but the respite was only short-lived. The metal of the wall began to buckle and tear in several other places, and with a thrill of pure horror I realised there was an entire group of the monstrosities ripping their way through to us.

‘The orks aren’t getting out of our way either,’ my aide responded, phlegmatic as ever, sending a burst of automatic fire down the corridor as

he spoke. Another burst of bolts responded, hissing over our heads, to impact against the wall. The 'stealers reeled from the multiple detonations, but rallied quickly, renewing their attack on the weakened barrier; at this rate they'd be through in a matter of seconds.

I backed away another couple of paces, swinging my chainsword in a defensive pattern, and waiting for a target of opportunity for my laspistol. I'd only have time for one or two shots, and I intended to make them count.

Then a flicker of motion caught my attention again, half-hidden by the shadows at roughly the height of my shins, and I whipped round to face it, bringing the pistol to bear. My finger began to tighten on the trigger.

'Commissar! Is that you?' The voice in my comm-bead was attenuated and hazed with static, and for a moment I was too taken aback to respond. 'The pict link is considerably degraded.'

'Drumon?' I slackened the pressure on the trigger, just in time to avoid blowing a hole in a CAT, almost identical to the one we'd found shortly before Blain had gone to report to the Emperor. It trundled out from behind a sagging console, which had concealed it from view when Jurgen and I first entered the room. 'Where are you?' I fired a couple of las-bolts at a genestealer which had ripped a hole in the wall while I was speaking, sufficient to poke its head and shoulders through, and which was reaching out to grab me. It dropped, most of its head now missing, to dangle grotesquely, halfway through the aperture, like a badly mounted trophy.

'Aboard the *Revenant*,' the Techmarine replied, sounding faintly surprised. 'We thought you were dead.'

'I soon will be,' I replied, with a degree of brusqueness, cutting at another 'stealer, which had burst through the wall as though emerging from some nightmare chrysalis. It retreated, leaking fluid from its thorax, and prepared to charge again. 'The hulk's crawling with 'stealers and greenskins.' As if to emphasise the point, Jurgen fired again, eliciting a bellow of orkish rage, and abandoned his post to join me. 'We're boxed in between them.'

'Sorry, sir,' Jurgen reported, yanking the luminator from the barrel of his lasgun and dropping it unceremoniously to the deck, where it rolled around, casting grotesque shadows across the monsters hemming us in. He drew his bayonet and snapped it into place where the light had been. 'I'm completely dry.'

'Hold your position,' Drumon advised, and cut the link.

'Like I've got any choice!' I snarled, ducking under a scything blow from

the rallying 'stealer, and laying it open from thorax to head before it could recover its balance. It dropped, and I turned to face the next, snapping off a shot at the first ork to enter the chamber as I did so. He staggered, then recovered, and began to charge, his clumsy axe raised for a killing blow, while the genestealer I was facing lunged, too fast for me to counter...

Then something seized me, crushed me and tore me inside out. For a timeless, blinding instant I lost all sense of who, what and where I was, overwhelmed by more pain and terror than I knew it was possible to experience. Then I felt another wrench, like that of a starship's transition from the warp back to realspace, and fell, feeling cold metal beneath my face.

'Commissar. Are you well?' It was Drumon's voice again, but real this time, not issuing from the tiny transceiver in my ear. I blinked my blurry vision as clear as I could, and felt huge ceramite gauntlets lifting me to my feet.

'I'll let you know,' I said, wondering vaguely why gretchin were hammering spikes into my temples, and no one was doing anything about it. 'Where are the 'stealers?'

'And the orks,' Jurgen added, looking about as healthy as I felt, which is to say not noticeably different from his usual demeanour.

'Back on the *Spawn of Damnation*,' Drumon said, as though that should have been obvious.

'Then where the hell are we?' I asked, trying to focus on our surroundings. We were in an echoing metal chamber, lit by functioning luminators. Arcane mechanisms were everywhere, being tended by solemnly-chanting tech-adepts, and the air was thick with incense and ozone. Everything I looked at made my headache worse, so I gave up trying to make sense of it.

'Aboard the *Revenant*,' Drumon said, in the same tone of voice. He indicated the automaton we'd stumbled across, which for some reason was still with us, and pottering around the echoing chamber at random. 'Fortunately the CAT's teleport homer was still functioning, so we were able to bring you back along with it.'

'You mean you could just have teleported the one we went to fetch back aboard any time you felt like it?' I asked, feeling foolish and angry in roughly equal measure.

The Techmarine shook his head. 'It was deactivated,' he reminded me.

'So it was.' And if I'd known then what I knew now, I'd have cheerfully

left it to rot. I glanced at the doorway, as another towering figure strode through it with a nod of greeting. 'Apothecary Sholer. A pleasure to see you.'

'I imagine so,' Sholer said. 'An unprotected teleportation can have unpleasant effects on the system.'

'Indeed it can,' I agreed. 'But, all things considered, a decided improvement on the alternative.'

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## TWENTY-THREE

I spent the best part of a week under Sholer's care, recuperating from the effects of being yanked through the fringes of the warp by the scruff of my neck,<sup>152</sup> and feeling vaguely resentful that I was suffering the worst hangover of my life without having had the fun which should have preceded it. Jurgen, to my surprise, seemed none the worse for the experience, recovering in little more than a day,<sup>153</sup> and busied himself as usual with fending off unwelcome visitors and sorting out the administrative trivia I felt too groggy to deal with. Some things I couldn't avoid, of course, Gries among them, and I filled my time between sleeping and gradually diminishing bouts of nausea with compiling as complete a report as I could of our wanderings aboard the *Spawn of Damnation*, and the unpleasant surprises I'd found there.

Feeling I ought to make a show of taking my position of Imperial Guard liaison officer seriously, I got Jurgen to forward copies of my evasions and excuses to Torven, who passed them to Duque and Kregeen in turn, and all three passed the information down the line of their respective commands; the inevitable upshot of which was that rumour and exaggeration soon began to outpace the factual summaries, so, by the time I was up and about again, practically everyone in the system was convinced I'd seen off a greenskin invasion and a swarm of genestealers, pretty much single-handed.

'It's no wonder the governor wants to see you,' Drumon told me, on his last visit to my quarters aboard the *Revenant*. Now that the immediate crisis was over, and I was feeling a lot more like my old self, I'd lost no time in

arranging my transfer to the Imperial Guard garrison on Serendipita. I'd had more than enough of spacecraft for the time being, and just wanted to be somewhere away from metal corridors and shadows that might turn out to harbour a genestealer or two. True, it would have to be a very foolish 'stealer indeed to try boarding an Astartes strike cruiser, but every time I glanced out of a viewport, the ominous mass of the space hulk could be seen looming over us, and the further I could get from it the better, so far as I was concerned. 'You seem to be the only man in the system more honoured than he is.'

'So long as he doesn't want to challenge me to a duel,' I jested, surprised, and a little touched, that he'd bothered to come and see me off.

Drumon smiled faintly. 'Small fear of that,' he said. 'The way the locals are talking about you, I think he would rather take on the brother-captain if he had a grievance.'

Jurgen fell into step behind us, hefting my kitbag along with his own, as we made our way through the corridors towards the hangar bay where our shuttle was waiting. As befitted the impression of modesty I endeavoured to cultivate, I'd asked for an Imperial Guard Aquila to collect my aide and I, rather than putting the Reclaimers to the inconvenience of dispatching a Thunderhawk – which meant I'd be able to sleep in peace, or catch up on some reading, without having to don the clumsy ear-defenders. As I'd saved him the bother of fending off a greenskin invasion, and the simultaneous infiltration of the system by ravening genestealers, Torven had been more than happy to indulge my whim, and I have to admit to feeling a warm glow at the sight of the sturdy little utility craft nestled in between the Thunderhawks like a fledgling among adult raptors.

At first, however, I barely noticed it, being too astonished at the sight of an honour guard of Reclaimers, their freshly burnished armour resplendent in the light from the overhead luminators, lined up between the doorway and the lowered boarding ramp of the Aquila. Gries himself was at their head, and he took a pace forwards as Drumon and I drew abreast of his position.

'Commissar. Your assistance has been appreciated,' he said, inclining his head to look down at me. Somehow he seemed to have got the impression that I'd been keeping the genestealers busy on purpose, buying the time for the boarding party to fight its way back to the Thunderhawk with the data Yaffel had managed to salvage from the Redeemer's cogitator core, and I wouldn't have felt comfortable disabusing him.

‘The honour’s all mine,’ I told him, truthfully enough. ‘Is the situation aboard the hulk stable enough to resume salvage operations?’

‘Not yet.’ He shook his head regretfully. ‘But the conflict between the orks and the genestealers is diminishing slowly, along with their numbers. When reinforcements arrive, we should be able to cleanse the key areas at least.’

‘I’m sure the magos will be delighted to hear it,’ I said. ‘As will the governor, when I report to him.’

I don’t mind admitting to feeling a flicker of apprehension as Jurgen and I climbed the boarding ramp. Even though I knew Mira had left the *Revenant* aboard the governor’s shuttle, along with the parasites she’d been herding, part of me still expected her to turn up at the last minute, as she had done before, ready to disturb my hard-won equilibrium again. She didn’t, of course, and I took my seat with a faint sigh of relief, finally daring to hope I’d seen the last of her, and wondering why that thought came with a faint pang of regret. Despite everything, life with her around had been far from dull, I had to concede that at least.

I felt no such ambivalence about my last sight of the *Spawn of Damnation*, though, bidding the cursed vessel a hearty good riddance as it gradually diminished to a speck, and finally vanished completely among the stars.

My first sight of Serendipita was every bit as spectacular as I’d been led to expect, the lush blue-green globe silhouetted against the mottled ochre hues of the gas giant around which it orbited, while the ring system laid a glittering diamond pathway beneath the Aquila’s keel. I couldn’t tell you how long I simply stared out of the viewport, while the world grew large enough to eclipse its primary, then occult it entirely, gradually growing to fill my field of vision. Eventually all I could see was the curve of a horizon, and the sprawl of a continent, encroaching on a cloud-flecked ocean; then the land expanded to encompass the whole viewport, its mottled surface slowly resolving into forests, plains and signs of habitation. Towns and cities became visible, roads appeared linking them, and the regular outlines of field boundaries began segmenting what, from higher up, had seemed to be nothing more than patches of foliage.

‘That must be it,’ Jurgen said, pointing to an expanse of parkland in the distance, its artfully natural landscape betraying the hand of human intervention. Before long he was proved correct, by the appearance of a palace, set on the shores of a lake which might once have been real before

someone decided to tidy it up a bit round the edges. It was low, and well proportioned, as such buildings go, constructed of some local stone of a faintly pinkish hue, which echoed the colours of the gas giant about which the whole world orbited. The pilot brought us down neatly on a landing pad fringed with the same material, which partly obscured the more utilitarian rockcrete necessary to support the weight of a shuttle, and bordered with flowerbeds stuffed with some local variety of flora.

‘And this must be the governor,’ I agreed, as the boarding ramp descended and a distinguished-looking fellow in a formal robe, his neatly curled waist-length beard embellished with a bow of yellow silk, stepped forwards to meet us. The style here was evidently informal. If he had household troops or bodyguards with him, they were tucked somewhere discreetly out of sight.

‘Commissar Cain?’ he enquired, as if there might be some doubt as to my identity, and I nodded once, in acknowledgement.

‘Governor Metrelle. My compliments on your garden – a real tonic to the spirit after so long in space.’

The man smiled faintly. ‘I’m the governor’s majordomo, commissar. His Excellency is waiting for you in the tea garden. If you’d care to walk this way?’ He turned and began leading the way across a neatly clipped lawn towards a topiary arch in a head-high hedge.

‘If I walked that way,’ Jurgen muttered, in a voice I devoutly hoped was inaudible, ‘I’d be singing soprano.’

Our guide stopped by the gap in the foliage and motioned us through. ‘Commissar Cain, your Excellency, and...’ his gaze rested on Jurgen for a moment, while his brow furrowed with the effort of attempting to formulate an adequate description, ‘another person.’

‘My aide, Gunner Jurgen,’ I said, stepping through the arch. Beyond was a pleasant formal garden, scattered with comfortable chairs and small tables, at the largest of which sat a young-looking man of athletic build with a chin you could have used to chisel granite. He stood, smiling, and shook me firmly by the hand.

‘Of course. Your indispensable right arm.’ To the astonishment of both of us he shook Jurgen’s hand too, wiping his own surreptitiously on the leg of his crisp white trousers as he returned to his chair. ‘I’ve heard a lot about you.’

‘All exaggerated, I’m sure,’ I said, slipping easily into the modest hero



routine. There were four place settings at the table, I noticed, although no other guests seemed to be here yet.

‘Not in the least,’ a warm contralto voice said, and my spine turned to ice. I’d have recognised it anywhere, even before Jurgen said ‘Good afternoon, miss,’ and I turned to see Mira smiling at me through the gap in the hedge.

I like to think I rallied quickly, responding with a formal inclination of the head, and returned the smile, as noncommittally as possible. I had no idea what she was doing here, and thought it best to bide my time until I saw how the land lay.

Metrelle smiled at her too, in the faintly simple-minded fashion of a man besotted with a member of the opposite sex, and not quite sure what to do about it. ‘My betrothed is a great admirer of yours, commissar. You seem to have made quite an impression on her while you were travelling together.’

‘How gratifying,’ I replied automatically, before the full import of his words sank in, and I raised an eyebrow at Mira. ‘Betrothed?’

‘Since last night.’ She smiled at the governor in a manner I remembered all too well. Then she turned to my aide. ‘Jurgen, I wonder if I could impose on you for a minute? I managed to get hold of some of that Valhallan drink you’re both so fond of, but our kitchen staff are a little unsure of the correct method of infusion.’

‘You managed to get some tanna?’ I asked, the full extent of the governor’s wealth and influence starting to become clear to me. It was all I could do to maintain a small personal supply of the stuff, with the access my position gave me to the vast resources of the Munitorum. Emperor alone knew how Metrelle had managed it, at just a few days’ notice, or how much it had cost him.

He nodded. ‘Mira said you’d appreciate it,’ he said.

‘If your servants don’t frak it up,’ Jurgen said, oblivious as ever to the niceties of non-military protocol, but our hosts didn’t seem to take it amiss. Mira was used to him, after all, and I was pretty sure Metrelle would go along with whatever seemed to suit her. ‘I’d better go and show them how it’s done.’

‘Thank you,’ Mira said, and smiled at the governor again, seeming as gooey as an éclair in a heatwave. ‘Would you mind pointing him in the right direction, dearest?’

‘Of course.’ Metrelle heaved himself out of the garden chair, and led Jurgen through the archway. His voice diminished in the distance. ‘Just

down here, past the toad pond and across the courtyard...'

'I know what you're going to say,' Mira said, switching off the simper and watching me through narrowed eyes, 'but what did you expect? You went gadding off to that drifting mausoleum and let everyone think you were dead.'

'And why bother fighting for a throne back home when there's one here you can just help yourself to with a smile and a quick proposal?' I added.

'Precisely.' Mira nodded, looking more aristocratic than ever, even if she was still spilling out of her gown like a joygirl desperate for custom. 'Viridia's going to be a complete mess for years after all the fighting, and it's a lot more comfortable here. Besides, Metty's quite sweet really. I could do a lot worse.'

I smiled, feeling a rush of relief so strong it left me breathless.

'Then I suppose congratulations are in order,' I said.

Mira watched me narrowly, sifting my words for any hint of sarcasm. 'I take it you're not going to make a scene, then?' she asked at length, sounding vaguely disappointed.

'No,' I said gravely, trying to look as though I was holding my emotions in check, and firmly suppressing the impulse to start doing handsprings round the garden. 'I won't spoil it for you. Best man won, and all that.'

Her expression softened again, so I assumed I'd got away with it. 'That's very sweet of you,' she said, although she must have known me better than that by now. 'And speaking of the best man, I've got a little favour to ask...'

'By all means,' I said, distracted by the mingled odours of Jurgen and freshly brewed tanna. He and the governor were returning, with a small comet tail of retainers, all bearing trays. Things were definitely looking up.

'Can you find some excuse to frak off back to Coronus before the wedding?' Mira asked. 'You're not exactly low profile around here, and I don't want to be upstaged on my big day, do I?'

'Consider it done,' I agreed. In truth, I'd already made up my mind to leave as soon as I could, the idea of living on a planet under Mira's capricious and pudgy thumb being far too uncomfortable to contemplate. I raised the tea bowl Jurgen had passed to me in a toast to the happy couple. 'The Emperor protects.'

Well, He'd definitely come through for me today; it was only polite to say thank you.

*[On which note of uncharacteristic piety, this portion of the Cain Archive finally meanders to an end.]*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## NOTES

1. Which indicates that this portion of his memoirs was composed some time before he got round to recounting the Interitus Prime incident: a typical example of his cavalier approach to chronology.

2. In his account of his escape from the necron tomb world Cain refers to the vessel as a battle-barge, which is hardly likely, given that these huge craft are only employed where a significant proportion of an Astartes Chapter's assets need to be transported between war zones. It's quite possible, however, that, given their rarity, he simply believed it to be a generic term for any Space Marine vessel.

3. He is, of course, joking here – or so I sincerely hope.

4. There have indeed been reports of necron warriors apparently surviving on worlds which have been subject to decrees of Exterminatus. Although, given their apparent mastery of the warp, it's equally possible that the 'survivors' merely arrived through an undetected portal deep below the surface after the firestorms abated.

5. A typically vague statement: there seem to have been around forty or fifty in total, far fewer than a full-strength company, but still more than sufficient to deal with the kind of civil insurrection sweeping the Viridia System.

6. The local name for law enforcers.

7. Melmoth is clearly labouring under the same misapprehension as Cain here.

8. Presumably because 'captain' is a Space Marine rank, and to

*confer it on a serf, even in a different context, might lead to confusion.*

*9. A generic term for all light warships incapable of warp travel.*

*10. As he does so often in the course of his memoirs, Cain is clearly compressing events here for dramatic effect; even at maximum acceleration, the Thunderhawk would have taken several hours, or possibly longer, to reach Viridia from the Revenant's closest viable point of re-entry to the materium.*

*11. Clearly an exaggeration, as the Thunderhawk would have been past far too quickly, and at too great an altitude, to be able to make out facial expressions on the ground.*

*12. The Imperial Guard term for their equivalent of a Space Marine combat squad.*

*13. Though Cain doesn't say so explicitly, no doubt expecting his readers to be sufficiently au fait with matters military to recognise it, this is almost certainly some form of urban camouflage pattern suited to operations in Fidelis.*

*14. Quite understandably, as most of Cain's colleagues would at least have had the man arrested, pending an investigation, and many would simply have shot him on the spot without even the formality of an enquiry.*

*15. Apparently in an underhive, although on which world remains a mystery.*

*16. Which means he must have drawn his laspistol, although he doesn't bother to mention the fact.*

*17. Non-commissioned officers.*

*18. The artillery unit he was assigned to at the outset of his career.*

*19. Conventional practice would be for Terminators to be deployed in dedicated squads, equipped with either ranged or close-combat weaponry. It's unclear from what Cain says here whether this is in fact the case, and two full squads were sent in, or whether the Reclaimers had combined elements of both in a single unit, as they also appear to do later in his account. If the latter, this would be extremely unusual.*

*20. Which of his own weapons he stowed to do this we can only speculate.*

*21. Many of the hybrids probably had the ability to do this as well, but by now the brood mind had evidently concluded that Cain would be less easy meat than the PDF troopers, and deployed the most*

*formidable of its assets accordingly.*

*22. I suspect a little exaggeration may be creeping in here, as close combat against a creature as formidable as a purestrain genestealer is hardly likely to leave enough time for defiant speeches.*

*23. Imperial Guard regulations are firm on this point, prescribing execution as the penalty for losing a weapon, unless it was an unavoidable consequence of action in the field. Which probably accounts for most Guard troopers' tendency to carry theirs everywhere when on duty, even to the latrines.*

*24. Cain might well have encountered purestrains on Keffia, although the short account of his activities there only mentions hybrids. He may also have seen them in one of the sporadic cleansing actions against the tyranid splinter fleets in which he was involved prior to this juncture.*

*25. A form of tyranid carnifex, so named for the sound it makes while spitting a ball of bio-plasma.*

*26. Clearly the result of air being ionised by the discharge of a turbo laser.*

*27. Since they would probably have teleported back to the Revenant at the conclusion of their mission, this wouldn't have concerned them overmuch.*

*28. Those of us who have had much to do with the Astartes, and found them rather more concerned with the traditions of their Chapters than effective cooperation, may find these sentiments ringing a little hollow...*

*29. Like many seasoned travellers, Cain uses the term to refer to law enforcers in general, rather than actual members of the Adeptus Arbites. As previously mentioned, they were known as 'Guardians' on Viridia.*

*30. The irony of this statement seems to have eluded Cain entirely, though not, I suspect, most of my readers.*

*31. Probably to make sure he wasn't pushed out of the loop entirely.*

*32. A Valhallan beverage, which Cain developed a taste for shortly after his first posting to a regiment from that world. Why, I have no idea.*

*33. He was, of course, one of the first Viridians to be screened and declared free of the xenos taint. Otherwise he'd hardly still have been*

*breathing, let alone given access to one of the most secure facilities on the planet.*

*34. Not strictly true, as she was the youngest of three siblings, but she was the only one present in Fidelis at the time.*

*35. Or, to give it its official title, The Emergency Martial Law Regulations and Provisions for the Safeguarding of Civilian Populations in Areas Under the Protection of His Divine Majesty's Imperial Guard and Allied Forces (CCXXXVIth revised edition, 759.M40).*

*36. The vast majority, certainly. Most, if not all, have their own traditions and secrets, sometimes to a degree which would seem positively heretical in less devoted servants of the Emperor.*

*37. From which we can infer that they'd either removed their helmets, and Cain had seen them on some other occasion, or he recognised the personal heraldry on their armour; probably the latter.*

*38. Not, I suspect, an analogy the Techmarine would have appreciated.*

*39. It's actually not that surprising, as the genestealer cult would have been few in number to start with, and no doubt concentrated on expanding its influence planetside, where most of the institutions it wished to subvert were based. Most of the active rebels in the offworld habs would have been simple dupes of the brood mind, rather than members of it.*

*40. The belt of cometary debris which marks the nominal boundary of a stellar system.*

*41. Traditionally, space hulks are given their names by the Inquisition conclave responsible for the sector in which they first appear, and, as Cain points out, they do tend towards the melodramatic.*

*42. Which seems to indicate that Cain was never made aware of the existence of Mira's siblings, something most people would have thought to mention at some point under the circumstances: a small, but telling, confirmation of her self-absorption.*

*43. Most Viridian histories of the war credit him with pulling the shattered remnants of the PDF back into a credible fighting force almost single-handed, and playing a decisive part in finally ridding the planet of the genestealer taint, but we obviously have to allow for a fair amount of bias and local chauvinism in these accounts. The*

*Imperial Guard records simply state that he was an effective mediator between them and the PDF, which might charitably be interpreted as grudging approval.*

*44. Probably not, in fact, given the average Viridian's tenacious faith in the Golden Throne, although I suppose there were the inevitable exceptions.*

*45. In fact they were probably more interested in searching for building materials than items of value.*

*46. As so often, Cain's habitual cynicism where members of the Ecclesiarchy are concerned may have led him to miss the point. Given the devout nature of so many Viridians, it's entirely possible that the labourers he saw were repairing the temple for spiritual rather than pragmatic reasons.*

*47. Intended to reduce the sound of the vertical thrusters, which would always be loudest at takeoff and landing, and contain the worst of an explosion in the event of an accident.*

*48. A faintly derisive nickname for acolytes of the Machine-God, common among Imperial Guardsmen, apparently derived from the cogwheel symbol of their calling.*

*49. From Soylens Viridians for the Machine-Spirit, a populist work intended to make some of the principles by which the Adeptus Mechanicus operates comprehensible to the vast majority of us with little understanding or interest in technothology: a no doubt laudable aim, which it signally fails to achieve, being too abstruse for the lay reader, and too simplistic for even the lowliest tech-priest. Its author, unsurprisingly, was Magos Yaffel, one of the handful of people actually to have read it.*

*50. It was also possible, of course, that Cain's suspicions about her true age were correct, and that this wasn't the first occasion on which she'd boarded a starship.*

*51. I must say I find that all too plausible: Cain possessed considerable personal charm and was perfectly willing to use it to get whatever he wanted from people. A particular kind of woman would be extremely susceptible to that, especially if she wasn't overly bright to begin with.*

*52. Which probably indicates that this portion of his memoirs was compiled before the tyranid incursions and the Black Crusade were to*



*drag him back to reluctant active service in the closing years of the 41st millennium.*

*53. Space Marines do, of course, eat, although most of them seem to regard doing so merely as providing fuel for their enhanced metabolisms, taking little more pleasure in the act than members of the Adeptus Mechanicus do. The real reason for the Reclaimers' reluctance to invite their guests to join them was probably that such gatherings are generally regarded as providing spiritual as well as physical sustenance, being accompanied by prayers to the Emperor and the Chapter's primarch, and readings from their own martial litanies. Doing so in the presence of outsiders, and thereby revealing some of their Chapter's most sacred mysteries to non-initiates, would, of course, be anathema to them.*

*54. Which would have, and did, take years.*

*55. Probably static cling. I used to have a dress like that, but it was never quite the same after a firefight with some hrud; and concealing a weapon while wearing it was always extremely uncomfortable, so I never bothered to find a replacement.*

*56. Not without reason: almost a decade was to pass before the Ordo Xenos felt able to declare Viridia free of taint with any degree of certainty, and the local authorities remain vigilant for any sign of a renewed outbreak to this day.*

*57. A peculiar form of recreation, practised in some form on many worlds, in which people attempt to balance on a plank being swept along by waves or water currents for as long as possible without falling off. Since they inevitably do, the appeal of the pastime escapes me.*

*58. Though Cain is clearly exaggerating a little here, he's quite right in the essence of his assertion: if there's an Adeptus Astartes Chapter which doesn't regard its training areas as hallowed ground I've yet to hear of it, and granting access to an outsider is an honour seldom conferred.*

*59. In fact he was a great deal better than that, being one of the finest swordsmen I've ever encountered, which in my line of work is quite something.*

*60. If anything, Techmarines tend to be regarded as somewhat eccentric at best by most Chapters, which affords them a fair amount*

*of latitude in their behaviour. In fact, judging by Cain's account, Drumon seems to be more accepted as an equal by his battle-brothers than would normally be the case, perhaps because of the Reclaimers' unusually strong ties to the Adeptus Mechanicus.*

*61. Hardly surprising, since they were probably aspirants to membership of the Reclaimers who'd narrowly failed the rigorous selection process.*

*62. Clearly more than the two Cain mentions seeing in the hangar bay earlier in his narrative; perhaps they were docked elsewhere, or simply engaged on other duties on the occasions he embarked and disembarked.*

*63. Damage Control Team, a term also in use by the Imperial Navy.*

*64. Valhallans have an intense loathing for this particular xenos breed, dating back to the unsuccessful ork invasion of their homeworld, and will engage them with scarcely less ferocity than the greenskins themselves. But with rather more tactical sense.*

*65. But probably not in quite those terms.*

*66. Something of an exaggeration: orks are considerably more robust than humans, but not quite to that extent.*

*67. Cain is speaking with some authority here, as he had considerable experience of captured ork weaponry on Perlia.*

*68. Hardly surprising, as they were being contested by a Space Marine captain and his command squad, as well as the armed crewmen Cain had previously noted.*

*69. One of the greenskins' principal deities, a piece of xenological trivia he'd presumably picked up during his hectic sojourn on Perlia a few years before.*

*70. Or, more likely, dragged into the warp in the wake of the Revenant, to be preyed upon by whatever daemons happened to be around at the time.*

*71. An orkish word for firearms in general. They have nothing more specific in their vocabulary, and, like many nouns referring to pieces of wargear, it appears to be a corrupted Gothic loan word.*

*72. Given that the main cause of perturbation in a hand holding a pistol on aim is the heartbeat, which affects the entire body, Cain's apparently unshakable conviction that his augmetic fingers increased his accuracy with such weapons may have been psychological rather*

*than physiological in origin.*

*73. Which probably accounted for at least some of the gunfire Cain noted earlier, orks having a fairly basic way of resolving most arguments.*

*74. It's unclear here whether Cain is being literal, or merely making a flippant reference to Mira's use of her hunting expertise. Many Space Marine Chapters do indeed display the bodies of their defeated enemies, but given their profusion tend to be rather more selective about it.*

*75. A traditional artisan's benediction while assessing a repair job; its origin now lost, although some scholars speculate that it's a symbolic communion with their materials, infusing themselves with their essence before commencing work. At any event, the tradition persists throughout the Imperium.*

*76. Orks unusually skilled at infiltration and sabotage.*

*77. According to the log of the Revenant, he was fending off an attacking ork with his mechadendrites and a convenient chair at the moment the vessel entered the warp.*

*78. Or remarkably good judgement, given the progress of Cain's subsequent career.*

*79. As is Cain's at this point. It seems quite astonishing that he should miss what Mira was so clearly driving at. In his defence, however, it must be pointed out that his experience of women prior to this particular liaison had been rather more broad than deep, so to speak, and that he'd had very little contact with the nobility of the Imperium, so lacked a context for her dynastic ambitions.*

*80. The exact ratio of male to female Navigators contracted out by the Navis Nobilite is a matter known only to them, although both sexes seem equally able practitioners of their arcane craft, and we can infer that only the most skilful would be accorded the honour of serving aboard a vessel of the Adeptus Astartes.*

*81. A promethium refining facility in the upper atmosphere of the outermost gas giant, with a population of around thirty thousand.*

*82. Cain appears to be referring here to the primary world, rather than the system with which, in accordance with Imperial tradition, it shared a name.*

*83. Accommodating larger vessels would be one such occasion, of*

course, but combining the two bays would also allow what the Navy refer to as through-deck operation, allowing fighters and shuttles to arrive at one end and depart from the other, reducing the time required to rearm and re-equip them during combat. Somewhat hazardous, with the hangar open to vacuum, of course, but Space Marines and their vassals tend to be a bit blasé about that kind of thing.

84. Which implies that both sets of doors were being left open, to expedite the disembarkation of the passengers: not the safest thing to do, but, as previously noted, Space Marines tend not to be too concerned at the possibility of exposure to vacuum.

85. Unlikely as this may sound, Sekara isn't exaggerating. According to Mott, my savant, such protostars are hardly uncommon in the galaxy, although it's extremely unusual to find one circled by even one habitable world, let alone the multiplicity of them described in this account.

86. The usual Imperial Guard abbreviation for commander-in-chief.

87. An Imperial Navy officer of some renown in the Damocles Gulf. Although he and Cain were both involved in the Adumbria incident of 937.M41, there's no evidence that they ever met face to face.

88. It seems that there were only three, an arbitrator senioris and two assistants, none of whom were on Serendipita itself when the Governor's shuttle was dispatched.

89. Or perhaps not. The configuration of the internal spaces would be unlikely to change much over the centuries, other than the occasional structural collapse as overstressed materials finally gave way.

90. Or, probably, within it. Space Marine units tend to operate autonomously for years, even decades, at a time, and officers of Gries's rank and status would have little opportunity or inclination to refer matters to a higher level of the command chain.

91. Hardly flattering to see inquisitors among the list, but considering the one Cain had the most to do with apart from myself was Killian, a Radical renegade mass-murderer, and barking mad to boot, I can't say I'm all that surprised.

92. A slang term common to many hive communities, referring to those both literally and figuratively at the bottom of the social heap, who scabble a precarious existence out of what they can salvage of the detritus falling from the higher levels. Cain alludes repeatedly to

*an early life spent in an underhive, but as yet his world of origin remains obscure.*

*93. A popular form of theatre on several worlds in the sector, in which a large cast of characters continually misunderstand one another to comedic effect. They're generally set in an aristocratic milieu, allowing the general populace a bit of harmless amusement at the expense of a stratum of society that's barely aware of their existence in any case, and culminate in some dramatic contrivance to bring everyone together at the same time. For obvious reasons, a ball is a frequent choice of the lazier playwrights, hence the name.*

*94. On Viridia, not to mention many other worlds where a period of service in the PDF is considered an acceptable way of keeping young members of the nobility relatively harmlessly occupied, the rather more flamboyant than practical uniforms of the units so favoured are a perennially popular subject for such packaging. Why any confectioner would consider their wares enhanced by such images we can only speculate, but the hope of selling a few boxes to rich idiots would be my guess.*

*95. A clear reference to his involvement in the defence of the sector against the tyrannid hive fleets at the turn of the millennium, the details of which, though fascinating, need not detain us at this juncture.*

*96. Despite Cain's highly subjective characterisation of her as both ruthless and selfish, there's no evidence at all that Mira intended deposing her father by force of arms. His earlier assertion that she was intent merely on strengthening her position against rival claimants when the governorship eventually fell vacant seems far more likely.*

*97. By which he meant that the object the auspex was scanning was dense enough to register strongly, and was therefore probably not a natural phenomenon.*

*98. Another quotation from Soylens Viridiens for the Machine-Spirit.*

*99. In actual fact it was only four or five kilometres across in any direction, but that's quite big enough under the circumstances.*

*100. A rare direct reference to Cain's own family history, although, as noted elsewhere, anything he says in this regard must be treated with considerable caution. Many of these fragments of information are clearly contradictory, particularly those which occur in his reported conversations with others.*

101. *In fact CATs have been in service with the Adeptus Astartes and the Adeptus Mechanicus for centuries, if not millennia. Few Space Marine Chapters make much use of them, however, preferring to rely on the expertise of their scouts under most circumstances, while the Mechanicus finds the more versatile servitor better suited for most practical purposes. Nevertheless, the construction and modification of CATs remains a popular pastime for a considerable number of tech-priests, who claim to find the activity meditatively calming and beneficial in advancing their understanding of the blessings of the Machine-God, so that it's a rare visit to a Mechanicus shrine which isn't likely to be interrupted by the erratic progress of one or more of these ambulatory devices. Despite these pious assertions, and though true servants of the Omnissiah would vigorously deny the fact, to outsiders they seem less like recreational construction projects than pets.*

102. *If not more so: this would irrevocably contaminate the gene-seed carried by the host's progenoid glands, passing on the taint to any later recruits implanted with it.*

103. *An Imperial Guard term for the accidental firing of a weapon.*

104. *A form of festival entertainment popular on a number of worlds in the Eastern Arm, in which incidents from the lives of the saints or the Emperor are mingled with the crudest kind of knockabout humour. Far from being considered sacrilegious, these are generally regarded with indulgent approval by the Ecclesiarchy, on the grounds that they're bringing the word of the Emperor to the masses, and a few flatulence jokes is a small price to pay for actually being listened to for once.*

105. *Ironically, despite his ambivalence towards her, Cain still seems to consider Mira more officer than civilian at this point – unless he's deferring to her diplomatic credentials.*

106. *Cain's experience of damaged ships was generally as a result of combat, of course, so he may well have been picturing the kind of structural damage inflicted by torpedoes or lance batteries, which would have indeed made it difficult for the tech-priest to get around.*

107. *As Cain points out at several points in the course of his memoirs, Jurgen, though effectively seconded to the Commissariat, and therefore outside the Imperial Guard command structure, was technically still a*

serving Guardsman, and subject to its rules of conduct. In his usual forthright fashion, Jurgen tended to deal with this contradiction by ignoring it completely, except when there was clearly something to be gained from deciding one way or the other, which he did on a case-by-case basis.

108. It's hard to be sure from Cain's vague description, but it's possible that these were portable cogitator cores, intended to download the data from the venerable archives aboard the derelict prior to attempting to salvage the system physically. That way, the information would survive, even if the mechanisms themselves proved too fragile to remove intact.

109. Since the Codex Astartes specifies an upper limit of ten men to a Space Marine squad, including Terminators, we can infer that either two smaller squads were present, or a single one had been reinforced by attached specialists of some kind. Since the most likely individual to have been accorded the honour of a personal suit of Terminator armour would have been a Librarian, who would undoubtedly have reacted to Jurgen's presence in a noticeable fashion, we can be reasonably confident that the former alternative was the case; which ties in with Cain's earlier description of a specialised assault squad working in concert with a regular formation of Terminators. If, of course, his habitually vague estimate of their numbers can be relied on.

110. Around a quarter of an hour, according to the official mission logs.

111. Something he may have witnessed for himself during the battle for the floating hives of Kosnar.

112. More likely the engine had been throttled back, allowing the gunship to coast, while the pilot corrected its attitude in preparation for docking.

113. Quite. The probability of the genestealers in the Viridia System having originated somewhere other than the Spawn of Damnation is in the order of 0.35%, according to my savant Mott, who has a considerable aptitude for this kind of statistical analysis. Or any other kind, come to that, which is why he's been barred from innumerable gaming establishments, particularly when accompanied by Cain.

114. They can't tolerate vacuum indefinitely, like some of the void-

*adapted creatures of the tyrannid hive mind, but they can certainly remain conscious and dangerous for considerably longer than an unprotected human would; so even depressurising a section of a ship or void station harbouring them may not be enough to subdue them entirely.*

*115. In fact they were probably a great deal more ancient than that; according to the surviving records, the Redeemer-class heavy cruiser was first commissioned during the lifetime of the Emperor, and used extensively in the great crusades predating the Horus Heresy. Along with so much else, the secrets of their construction were lost in the course of the centuries following that cataclysmic upheaval, and although they continued to serve with the Imperial Fleet, the inevitable losses were never able to be replaced. The last known example was destroyed by renegades attempting to force passage through the Cadian Gate early in M35.*

*116. A flippant reference to the liturgical chants and votive incense generally employed by the Ecclesiarchy.*

*117. Or perhaps not quite so remarkable, considering the relative rarity of the occasions on which it had both popped out of the warp in an Imperial stellar system, and someone had been on hand to take auspex readings. If anyone had tried to board it before the Reclaimers, they left no record of the attempt; not even in the rather more comprehensive archives maintained by the Ordo Xenos.*

*118. Another typically vague statement, although study of the deck plans would seem to indicate either two or three, depending on whether you counted the exit from the hangar bay or not.*

*119. Not quite; though phenomenally tough, even compared to conventional Space Marine armour, Terminator suits are just as vulnerable to a lucky shot as anything else. Which, given that they're also employed by the Traitor Legions, is probably just as well.*

*120. Though Cain seems unaware of it, this was almost certainly Blain's blood, that of Astartes being modified to coagulate instantly on exposure to air in order to seal wounds which would incapacitate a normal man without impairing their fighting ability. That the Terminator had lost enough of it to leak out of his suit would indicate severe trauma, even by Space Marine standards.*

*121. Or, perhaps, by Jurgen's proximity: although his peculiar anti-*



*psychic talent had yet to be revealed, some time later on Gravalax, it could well have been disrupting the brood mind, isolating and disorientating any of the genestealers incautious enough to venture close enough to him to become affected.*

*122. That he was evidently monitoring the condition of the other Astartes in the boarding party can be taken as a fairly reliable indicator that he was in overall charge of it; unless, as the de facto artificer responsible for their maintenance, he was more concerned with the condition of the Terminator suits than their wearers.*

*123. If true, one or both weapons must have been damaged in some way, in order for the las-bolt to be so widely diffused, instead of penetrating more deeply over a smaller surface area. Unless, of course, he's resorting to hyperbole again.*

*124. Small utensils, with a bowl roughly the size of a thumbnail, traditionally used to measure out the infusion. Among Valhallans, the consumption of this beverage, to which Cain's long association with regiments from that world left him inexplicably partial, has acquired a great deal of custom and etiquette, as baffling to outsiders as the appeal of the drink itself.*

*125. The usual Adeptus Astartes designation for the twin-barrelled variant Cain noticed before; presumably he picked this up in conversation at some point, probably with Drumon.*

*126. This kind of fluctuation in the local gravity field is apparently common aboard space hulks, and far from unknown on the larger naval vessels and charter ships, particularly when they've been cobbled together from salvaged hulls: it's apparently due to the misalignment of overlapping gravity generators, something which is almost inevitable when as many vessels as commonly make up a space hulk have been randomly thrown together.*

*127. A debatable point. Some, otherwise indistinguishable from humans at a casual glance, seem to have inherited all the arcane senses of the abominations which polluted the genes of their forebears, while others, much closer to purestrains in appearance, do not. As with so much else where genetics is concerned, random chance appears to play a major part in the distribution of these characteristics.*

*128. Or possibly ozone from the electrical discharge.*

129. A torrent of liquid falling into the sump, or lowest levels, from higher up in a hive; some last for years, or even decades. Given the enclosed nature of an underhive, the echoes they raise can be quite literally deafening if appropriate precautions aren't taken.

130. A consequence of the constituent vessels having been brought together by the warp currents, so that their physical structures had become intermingled rather than coterminous; a state of affairs rendered permanent by the hulk's periodic sojourns in the real universe.

131. An orkish word, referring to the greenskins' equivalent of tech-priests, although their rites are as primitive as the rest of their culture. Instead of propitiating the machine-spirits which serve them, in the manner of the Adeptus Mechanicus, the mekboyz appear to terrorise them into acquiescence.

132. Actually, for orks, there are no other necessities to speak of.

133. This instinct, which has been observed many times over the millennia, is undoubtedly real, and deeply ingrained. Although, since orks are perfectly capable of constructing navigable starships, the question of why they should continue to trust their fate to the uncertain drifting of a space hulk remains unanswered. Whatever the reason, however, they remain one of the most common xenos breeds to be found infesting space hulks, second only to genestealers in frequency of sighting, and there is much anecdotal evidence that a few even manage to exert a modicum of control over the course of the hulks they occupy once they re-enter the materium.

134. Which for orks are more or less indistinguishable.

135. Like many Valhallans, Jurgen was able to read orkish glyphs, a cultural legacy of the failed greenskin invasion of his homeworld several generations before. To this day, natives of that world retain a particular detestation for orks, and a strong tradition of knowing the ways of the enemy, the better to confound them, persists.

136. An orkish word denoting status, one of the many phrases Cain appears to have picked up during his activities on Perlia, or from subsequent encounters with the creatures.

137. The orkish warboss Cain bested in single combat on Perlia, effectively breaking the back of the invasion in the process.

138. Orkish warriors or footsoldiers; also used as a generic suffix to

*indicate a group with more specialised abilities, like mekboyz (ibid.), weirdboyz (the nearest greenskin equivalent to sanctioned psykers), painboyz (roughly analogous to medicae or surgeons, although their ministrations are only sought by most orks under the direst of circumstances), and so on. Largely synonymous with gitz, which is often applied to any group of boyz which doesn't include the speaker.*

*139. Not necessarily a metaphor in the case of orks.*

*140. Possibly from an eldar vessel, or a long-deceased tyranid leviathan.*

*141. He must have been almost completely exhausted by this point to take such an uncharacteristically reckless course of action; although he does at least seem to have retained sufficient sense not to try cutting through the bulkhead directly, which would have taken a considerable amount of time and noise even if his chainblade had been able to penetrate it.*

*142. Though Cain errs in the specifics here, he is correct in the essentials: like most tyranid organisms, the senses of the average genestealer (if there can be said to be such a thing, given the astonishing mutability of all such creatures) are extremely acute. Although they do indeed use vision as well as their other senses, their sight is by no means limited to the visible spectrum, extending well into the infrared and the ultraviolet.*

*143. Or from a different nest; similar hibernacula would have been distributed throughout the hulk, allowing the brood mind to survive the loss of a group or two.*

*144. Though Hydras are intended primarily for air defence, most Imperial Guard commanders are well aware of the damage their quad-mounted autocannon can do to a heavily armoured target or dispersed infantry formation, and aren't slow to take advantage of the fact when the opportunity presents itself.*

*145. A substantial proportion of it, at any rate; the number of genestealers Cain describes could hardly have fitted into so narrow a maze of corridors all at once.*

*146. An orkish word, which translates roughly as 'go away', but which may also mean, 'leave it alone', or 'I doubt your veracity', according to context. Clearly the second of the three meanings is intended here.*

147. *The township on Perlia where Cain's celebrated March of Liberation began. It was subsequently renamed Cainstead, to his mingled amusement and embarrassment; even after taking up residence on that world, as a tutor at the schola progenium there following his retirement, he continued to refer to the place by its original name.*

148. *Orks in a position of authority.*

149. *The usual orkish word for their smaller cousins.*

150. *Clearly not a literal half-dozen, then...*

151. *Presumably in one of the minor firefights Cain glossed over a few pages ago.*

152. *The actual mechanisms of teleportation are a little more complex than that, involving the linkage of two discrete physical points through a precisely focussed Geller field, but Cain's typically forthright description is close enough for most purposes.*

153. *Possibly because his peculiar gift cushioned him from the worst effects of exposure to the warp, although Cain would have had no way of knowing that at the time.*

# THE LAST DITCH

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



*Editorial Note:*

*This extract from the memoirs of Ciaphas Cain might strike some as a whimsical or even bewildering choice, concerning as it does his return to the world of Nusquam Fundamentibus, when the details of his previous visit have yet to be disseminated. His activities on that occasion, however, relate only peripherally to the material at hand, and, for the most part, whatever is germane can quite clearly be inferred from context. Where this is not the case, I have attempted to remedy the deficiency by the interpolation of other material, or the provision of my own supplementary comments.*

*I've done the same throughout Cain's account of the events of his second visit, which, as ever, glosses over almost everything which doesn't concern him personally. Since he was serving with the Valhallan 597th at the time, one of the primary sources on which I've been reluctantly forced to rely remains the published reminiscences of the celebrated Lady General Jenit Sulla, who, at that time, was a far less exalted officer in the same regiment. Suffice it to say that, as before, the Gothic language capitulates early against her sustained assault, and I've endeavoured to restrict the use of the resulting literary casualties to a minimum.*

*The bulk of what follows is Cain's own account, however, and so far as I've been able to ascertain, as truthful and accurate a record of events as he habitually provides.*

*Amberley Vail, Ordo Xenos.*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## ONE

I've been to an awful lot of places I'd rather not go back to in the course of my long and discreditable career, but every now and then fate, or the hand of the Emperor, has decided otherwise. Returning to Perlia<sup>1</sup> would turn out to have a definite upside, apart from the odd interruption by Chaos-worshipping loons with ridiculous moustaches<sup>2</sup>, but the prospect of another visit to Nusquam Fundumentibus most certainly didn't.

My dismay at the prospect never showed on my face, of course, a lifetime of concealing my true feelings replacing it with the all-purpose neutral expression which most people seemed to take for polite interest.

'Haven't been there in a while,' I said levelly, staring at the regicide board between me and Lord General Zyvan as though it were of far greater interest than the news that he was proposing to send me back to a freezing hellhole I'd been more than happy to turn my back on twenty years before. In the decade or so since our first encounter on Gravalax we'd fallen into the habit of socialising on the rare occasions it was possible to do so, finding one another's company tolerably pleasant, and I had no wish to introduce a note of discord into the evening. Neither of us expected to remain on Coronus<sup>3</sup> for long – no one ever did – and I'd rather my future access to his table and exceptional cellar remained unimpeded by any bad feeling which might linger at our departure.

'Since you saw off the greenskin invasion,' Zyvan said, as though their defeat had been entirely my doing, rather than that of an Imperial Guard task force over ten thousand strong. Truth to tell, I'd spent the entire



campaign trying to keep warm, and as far from the orks as possible; but the reputation I'd picked up on Perlia as an ork-fighter *par excellence* kept getting in the way of the latter ambition, to the point where I'd once again been credited with breaking the back of their assault almost single-handed<sup>4</sup>. Pointless quibbling about it, though; the legend had taken on a life of its own by now, and Zyvan would undoubtedly think I was merely being modest anyway.

So I simply shrugged, and muttered something about having had a lot of good men beside me (which was almost true, as I'd done my best to make sure they were a pace or two in front most of the time, especially when the orks were around), and Zyvan smiled in the manner intended to convey that he hadn't been fooled for a second.

'The point is,' he said, leaning across the board to refresh my goblet of amasec, 'you know the place. You've fought over the ground before, and your regiment will feel right at home there.'

Well, I couldn't argue with that. Being deployed on an iceworld would be the next best thing to a holiday as far as the Valhallans were concerned, and the prospect of orks to kill when they got there the icing on the cake<sup>5</sup>. So I nodded, and flipped one of his Ecclesiarchs, setting up what I hoped would be a winning move in another couple of turns. 'They'll be pleased,' I conceded, with carefully judged understatement. 'Particularly if it lasts a little longer than our last sojourn on an iceworld.'

Zyvan smiled tightly. The 597th and I had only been on Simia Orichalcae for a day or two before being forced to withdraw, losing the promethium refinery we'd been sent to defend to the emerging denizens of a hitherto unsuspected necron tomb. Blowing up the installation had buried them again<sup>6</sup>, and preserved our little corner of the galaxy from an onslaught of the hideous machine creatures<sup>7</sup>, but indisputably failed in our original mission objective. The Adeptus Mechanicus had not been pleased to lose one of their precious shrines, not to mention the chance to loot the tomb they fondly imagined we'd cost them, and Zyvan had been left to face the wrath of the senior tech-priests; at least until I got a message to Amberley, whose retroactive sanction of our actions by the Inquisition had finally got the cogboys off his back. 'I'm sure things will go a lot more smoothly this time,' he said.

'They could hardly go worse,' I agreed, equally inaccurately, and sipped my drink, relishing the sensation of warmth as it slipped down my gullet. I

might as well enjoy it while I could; there'd be little enough to take the chill off where we were going.

'An iceworld?' Colonel Kasteen asked, not quite managing to conceal her enthusiasm at the prospect. She exchanged a brief smile with her second-in-command, Major Broklaw, whose expression remained as taciturn as ever, but not enough to fool someone who knew him as well as I did. 'Which one?'

Two identical expressions of polite enquiry faced me across the table between us, if a sheet of flakboard and a couple of trestles could be dignified by such an appellation. Like pretty much everything else on Coronus it was temporary, the stark room we'd requisitioned for meetings just as likely to revert to storage space, administrative matters, or a makeshift kitchen as soon as we vacated our assigned barrack blocks in favour of the next regiment to pass through here *en route* to another war. The afternoon sun was paling beyond the grime-encrusted window, casting a faint pall of darkness across us, too slight as yet to require alleviation by the luminators, but sufficient to make the pallid complexions typical of iceworlders stand out in even greater contrast than usual to Kasteen's vivid red fringe and Broklaw's midnight-coloured mop.

'And why us?' Broklaw added, which wasn't quite as odd a question as you might think. Valhallans are the finest cold weather troopers in the galaxy, without a doubt, but that doesn't mean much to the Munitorum when it comes to deploying them. Although the tacticians and strategists do their best to make use of any special skills a regiment possesses, all too often the never-ending requirement to prop up a faltering front somewhere or other means just sending in whoever's available. Which meant that in my time with the 597th I'd been baked as often as I'd frozen, although their habit of air conditioning their quarters to temperatures better suited to the storage of perishable provisions had made me grateful for my Commissarial greatcoat even in environments where I'd discarded it hastily as soon as I'd stepped outside.

'Nusquam Fundumentibus,' I began, answering the colonel's question first, and she nodded as though the name meant something to her. I suppose that shouldn't have surprised me, as iceworlds with a substantial human population aren't as common as all that, and bound to be of interest to someone who grew up thinking whiteout blizzards are the perfect weather

for a postprandial stroll.

‘We were there when the greenskins invaded,’ she said, before glancing at Broklaw again, a spark of mischief animating the green eyes below her striking auburn fringe. ‘The women, anyway.’

Broklaw shrugged, accepting the mild joke at his expense. The 597th had been cobbled together from the battered remnants of the 296th and the 301st after the tyranids had reduced both to well below fighting strength, and the initial amalgamation had not been a happy one. These days, however, it was hard to believe that any animosity had ever existed between the women who’d made up the 296th and the men of the former 301st. (Which caused enough problems of its own for me to fully appreciate why mixed gender regiments were the exception rather than the rule in the Imperial Guard, but I’d long since discovered that a blind eye and a well-meaning chaplain were enough to let me sidestep most of them.) ‘There were plenty left for us when we arrived,’ he rejoined, a fleeting half-smile drawing any implication of criticism from the remark.

‘I think we’ll find enough orks to go round when we get there,’ I put in, and the major’s slate-grey eyes met my own, all trace of levity vanishing as suddenly as an unattended sandwich in the presence of my aide.

‘Another invasion?’ he asked hopefully, ‘or a secondary outbreak?’

‘An outbreak,’ I confirmed, and Kasteen nodded judiciously.

‘About time for one<sup>8</sup>,’ she agreed. ‘Where’s it centred?’

‘Hard to tell,’ I said, with a surreptitious look at the data-slate Zyvan had given me, and which I hadn’t read with nearly as much attention as it deserved. ‘They’ve hit a number of isolated settlements in the Leeward Barrens, but they’ve been staying well clear of the main cavern cities.’

‘So far,’ Kasteen said, a faintly cynical edge colouring her tone. By the time we arrived, the information we had would be so out of date as to be all but worthless, and we were seasoned enough campaigners to be well aware of the fact. ‘What’s the local garrison doing about it?’

‘There isn’t one,’ I told her. ‘It was withdrawn when the tau started expanding into the Halcyon Drift.’ The Imperium had responded to the provocation by fortifying every system vulnerable to annexation, stripping far too many second-line worlds of their protection for comfort, in the hope that the notoriously opportunist xenos would back down in the face of a show of force. So far, to everyone’s surprise, it seemed to have worked; although, knowing them, they’d probably already turned their attention to

another target, probably one which had suddenly been left undefended as a result of the recent redeployment.

‘So the local militia’s taking up the slack,’ Broklaw said, in tones which left me in no doubt what he thought about that. Like most Guard officers, he had a dim view of the martial prowess of the average planetary defence force; a view which, in many cases, was well merited, although now and again I’d fought alongside local troopers any Guard regiment would have been proud to call their own.

‘Yes and no,’ I told him, unable to suppress a certain degree of amusement as I spoke. ‘There is one Imperial Guard regiment already engaged with the enemy, apparently.’

‘And that would be?’ Kasteen asked, happy enough to indulge my taste for the dramatic.

‘The Nusquan First,’ I told them. Neither officer seemed particularly happy to hear this, which I could hardly blame them for, as I’d been less than thrilled myself when Zyvan gave me the good news. ‘Newly founded, but yet to ship out.’

‘How many companies?’ Broklaw asked, with the air of a man determined to get all the bad news out of the way as quickly as possible.

‘Three so far,’ I said, ‘out of a mooted six.’

‘Wonderful,’ Kasteen said heavily. ‘Half a regiment of new troopers to babysit, while every militia trooper on the planet goes berserker trying to make the cut.’

‘On the plus side,’ Broklaw added, after a thoughtful pause, ‘there’s a planet full of orks to kill.’ Which cheered Kasteen up, anyway, even if it didn’t do a lot for me.



*Editorial Note:*

*As Cain typically ignores most of the background to the conflict in which he was shortly to become embroiled, the following extract may prove illuminating for any of my readers prepared to face the ordeal of wading through it.*

From *Like a Phoenix on the Wing: the Early Campaigns and Glorious Victories of the Valhallan 597th* by General Jenit Sulla (retired), 101.M42.

Not a heart among us failed to soar at the news we were to return to Nusquam Fundumentibus<sup>9</sup>, a world whose pristine snowfields, majestic glaciers and towering snow-capped mountains were still recalled fondly by those of us privileged to have served there when last the greenskins dared to sully its face with their presence<sup>10</sup>. That the orkish horde had returned was hardly unexpected, as the long and bitter struggle to finally cleanse their taint from our Emperor-blessed home world had taught us, but I was far from alone in thinking that their renewed onslaught could hardly have been more propitiously timed. What better warriors of the Imperium to punish them for their temerity than the daughters and sons of Valhalla, and what better regiment from among their ranks than the 597th? For, in addition to the prowess in battle shared by all fortunate enough to have started life among the snows of Valhalla, and privileged enough to have been accepted by the Imperial Guard, we alone had the inspirational guidance of Commissar Cain to ensure our victory against whatever foes the galaxy chose to throw at us.

Knowing of the part he played in bringing the greenskins to heel some two decades before, I took my place among the company commanders for the tactical briefing with a thrill of anticipation, eager to see what words of encouragement he had for us, and I must admit to being far from disappointed. In accordance with protocol the briefing was given by Colonel Kasteen, but she was as aware as the rest of us of Commissar Cain's previous experience of the battlefield we were so soon to test ourselves on, and had invited him to attend, as had become something of a regimental custom. When the commissar spoke it was with his habitual modesty, of course – his advice concise, cogent, and to the point, with never so much as a single superfluous word wasted<sup>11</sup>.

It seemed that, in the perfidious manner of their kind, a few greenskins had survived the campaign against them, fleeing like the cowards they were to seek refuge in the harshest and most inaccessible parts of Nusquam Fundamentibus. Since then they'd been biding their time, building up their numbers and preparing themselves for a fresh onslaught against the faithful servants of the Emperor. Now, it seemed, the time was right, a sufficiently brutal and ruthless leader having emerged among them to unite the factions, and lead them out of the caverns and passes of the Great Spinal Range to despoil the relatively sheltered regions which that awe-inspiring line of mountains protects from the worst of the prevailing blizzards, and which accordingly supports an appreciable proportion of the total human population<sup>12</sup>. As yet they'd confined their depredations to small, poorly defended habitations, lacking the courage to face the Emperor's warriors in open combat, but that was sure to change as their easy victories engendered an arrogant and unmerited confidence, bringing fresh resolve and reinforcements to the banner of their leader, until even Primadelving<sup>13</sup> itself would be under threat.

That such a state of affairs would be intolerable to all devout followers of the Golden Throne need scarce be said, though none of us hearing the measured tones of Commissar Cain feared such an outcome for a moment. Inspired as always by his quiet confidence, I vowed on the spot that no greenskin would ever set foot in the very seat of Imperial power on Nusquam Fundamentibus, and I'm certain I was not alone in doing so.

Our spirits thus buoyed, we embarked on the ship assigned to us for the voyage with stout hearts and firm resolve, as yet unaware of the catastrophic fashion in which the voyage was to end, and the heroism which

Commissar Cain was yet again to display in the face of so unexpected a reversal.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## TWO

‘Doesn’t look like much,’ Jurgen said, punctuating his words with a blast of halitosis as he craned his neck for a better view of the vessel we were approaching. He’d maintained his usual taciturn silence as our overburdened shuttle battered its way through the atmosphere on its way to orbit, but now we were coasting smoothly through vacuum his stomach appeared to have settled sufficiently for him to attempt conversation again.

I turned my head to see through the viewport more clearly, and move my nose as far from my aide’s vicinity as possible, feeling a faint flickering of apprehension as I got my first clear look at the hastily-requisitioned cargo ship which was to be our home for the next few weeks<sup>14</sup>. It loomed over our shuttle as majestically as any other starfaring vessel I’d ever seen, but my immediate impression was one of shabbiness rather than the awe-struck wonder I generally felt at such moments. Chimera-sized patches had been crudely welded over several of the hull plates, whose runes of protection looked faded and worn, while thickets of antennae and auspex arrays hung at odd angles, clearly later additions to the superstructure. It didn’t look anything like as decayed as the derelicts making up the space hulk I’d been foolish enough to board with the Reclaimers, of course, but, by and large, I’d seen orkish vessels which seemed barely less spaceworthy. As we drifted closer, I was able to make out several parties of servitors and void-suited artificers carrying out their arcane rituals on the hull itself, and felt far from reassured.

‘Neither did the *Pure of Heart*,’ I reminded him, more for my own benefit



than his, 'and that got us to Simia Orichalcae and back.'

'She had her own tech-priest aboard, though,' Jurgen said. 'If this scow's got one, he's been slacking off.' Which seemed a fair assessment, and it was certainly true that fully ordained disciples of the Omnissiah were hardly common on a vessel of this size.

I shrugged, attempting to appear unconcerned for the benefit of the troopers surrounding us. 'I'm sure it'll be up to the job,' I said.

My first sight of the docking bay was sufficient to raise my spirits however, the purposeful bustle of troopers disembarking and stowing equipment almost soothing in its familiarity, and even the sight of Captain Sulla hectoring her platoon commanders about some discrepancy or other in their manifests wasn't enough to dispel the sudden improvement in my mood. As ever, she seemed determined that First Company would get stowed away first, and more efficiently than anyone else, and her undeniable expertise in logistics made her just the woman to get the job done<sup>15</sup>. There had even been some debate once her promotion to Captain was confirmed as to whether she should be given Third Company<sup>16</sup>, where her skills could be best put to use, but by that time she'd settled in comfortably as acting commander of First, and Kasteen, Broklaw and I had eventually decided to leave well enough alone. Whether her tendency to impulsive action would be tempered by her greater responsibilities had yet to be answered, though, and I made a mental note to stay well out of the way if there was even the remotest likelihood of her going into combat until the question had been settled.

'Commissar!' Inevitably she hailed me, despite my best efforts to sneak past while she was distracted, her face breaking into the familiar toothy grin which always put me in mind of something equine. 'Captain Mires here was wanting to speak to someone in authority.'

The name meant nothing to me, as we had no one of that name and rank in the 597th, and for a moment I wondered if we were going to be sharing our voyage with another regiment after all; then the coin dropped, and I found myself extending a hand to a short, bearded man in a white robe cinched with an over-stretched vermillion cummerbund. Like many of the civilian freighter captains<sup>17</sup> I'd met before, he seemed eager to show his appreciation at the honour being done his vessel by our presence, while underlining the fact that it was his ship and he wasn't about to change the way things were done aboard it for our benefit.

‘Are you in charge, then?’ he asked, taking my proffered hand for a single perfunctory shake, before dropping it again hastily as it dawned on him that not all the fingers inside my glove were the ones I’d been issued with at birth. Explaining my position outside the chain of command in terms a civilian could grasp was too tedious to contemplate, and I was sure Kasteen had better things to do than be bothered by self-important voiders in any case, so I simply nodded.

‘Commissar Ciaphas Cain,’ I said, ‘at your service.’

I’d got used to a wide variety of responses to my name over the years, as my reputation continued to grow beyond all reason, especially once the wildly exaggerated tales of my exploits began to be circulated among the civilian population<sup>18</sup>, but Mires’s reaction took me completely by surprise. Instead of the faintly glazed expression of someone struggling to comprehend that I was real and standing in the same room, or slack-jawed awe, or the studied nonchalance of those refusing to appear impressed by me with which I had become familiar, he guffawed loudly, and slapped me on the back. ‘Course you are,’ he said. ‘Nice one. Bet the fems fall for that all the time, eh?’

To my own surprise I laughed too, not least at Sulla’s expression of disbelieving outrage; she was usually so full of herself that it was a refreshing novelty to see her taken aback for once. ‘They have been known to,’ I admitted, truthfully enough, although my days of carefree dalliance were pretty much behind me by that point<sup>19</sup>. ‘What’s the problem?’

‘Too many bits of cargo ending up in the wrong place,’ he told me, with a pointed glance in Sulla’s direction. ‘My deckhands are responsible for stowage. They know how to optimise the space properly, and none of your lot will let them do their jobs.’

‘I’m sure they’re the best crew in the sector,’ I lied shamelessly, ‘when it comes to handling regular portage, but military equipment needs special skills to move safely.’ I raised my voice a little above the noise of several crates of grenades cascading from their pallet, and the ensuing heated argument about whose fault it had been. ‘The explosives need regular checking, so they need to be kept accessible. And away from anything liable to cause an accidental detonation.’ Seeing Sergeant Jinxie Penlan, whose nickname was well earned, wading into her squabbling squad to restore order, I began to move away, Mires ambling after me.

‘See your point,’ he admitted, rubbing his nose thoughtfully. ‘Best not to

upset your system, eh? Don't want any holes in my deckplates.'

'I think we're in agreement on that,' I conceded. 'Was there anything else?'

'As it happens.' He jerked a dismissive thumb in Sulla's direction. 'The stropmy mare I was talking to says you want a hold left empty. Is that right?'

'It is,' I confirmed, trying not to smile at his description of her, however much I might agree with it. 'We'll need a training area where our people can practise their combat drills in transit.'

Mires shrugged. 'So long as you pay for any damage to the bulkheads.'

We'd reached the corridor beyond the cargo bay by now, the door grinding closed behind us to cut off the hubbub of disembarkation, and I took in our new surroundings with no little surprise. If anything, the interior of the vessel seemed even less prepossessing than my initial sight of its exterior had led me to expect.

Several of the luminator panels in the ceiling were flickering fitfully, a couple of them completely dark, and an inspection panel in the wall hung askew, revealing a little of the wiring inside. Judging by the degree of yellowing on the prayer slip sealed to its lip by a dust-encrusted blob of wax bearing the cogwheel imprint of the Adeptus Mechanicus, the tech-priest it had last been removed for was probably in his dotage by now, if not reduced to dust and rust. 'I doubt we'll leave anything in a worse state than it already is,' I said.

Mires bristled. 'Nothing wrong with my ship,' he said, as affronted as though I'd just accused him of an unnatural affection for gretchin. 'She's a bit patched, I grant you, but as sound as your faith in the Emperor.' Which was far less encouraging than I imagine he intended it to be.

'No doubt,' I said, as diplomatically as I could. The last thing we needed was to hack off our skipper before we'd even broken orbit.

Mires nodded, accepting the implied apology. 'She could do with a bit of work,' he conceded. 'Here and there.'

'If you're lucky,' I said, unable to resist teasing him a little, 'you'll take a bit of combat damage. Then the Munitorium will stand you a refit.'

'You think that's likely?' Mires asked, trying not to sound apprehensive, and failing dismally.

'Not really,' I said, to his visible relief. 'The orks don't have spacecraft this time around. Unless they've called in reinforcements, of course.' Which hardly seemed likely, as orkish freebooter crews tended to be more

interested in going after loutable cargoes, or warships capable of giving them a good scrap, than getting involved in anything to do with ground actions. Unless the fighting on Nusquam Fundumentibus escalated to a full-blown *Waaaaagh!* of course, in which case it would attract every greenskin in the sector; which made nipping this outbreak in the bud even more of a priority.

Had I known it at the time, the orks were going to be the least of our worries, even before the voyage came to its catastrophic conclusion; but in all honesty I don't see how anyone could have predicted the unfortunate outcome of the decades of neglect the *Fires of Faith's* most vital systems had been subject to.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



*Editorial Note:*

*Though Cain devotes a considerable number of pages to the conclusion of the Fires of Faith's final voyage, he seems to assume that any readers of his memoirs would be as familiar as he was with the mechanics of warp travel, which I suppose is hardly surprising given the amount of time he spent in transit from one war zone to another in the course of his career.*

*In order to fill this gap I consulted some of the less deranged members of the Ordo Malleus among my colleagues in the Concilium Ravus and, although helpful, the information they gave me seemed far beyond the comprehension of the casual reader, not to mention myself. Accordingly, I fell back on a rather more rudimentary source, which at least covers the essentials.*

From *The Society for the Assistance of Travellers Handbook*, 212th edition, 778.M41.

Travel between the stars is not without hazard, since to do so is to pass through the realm of Chaos itself. Society members are accordingly urged in the strongest possible terms to seek the blessing of a priest before commencing any voyage, however short, and to ensure that every item of luggage to be stowed in the hold is protected by charms of warding, easily obtainable from duly sanctified vendors at the point of embarkation. Prayers of thanks for a safe deliverance are also customary as soon as practicable upon arrival; many chapels and temples are generally to be found in the

vicinity of starports for such benisons.

While under way, starfaring vessels are protected from the warp by powerful wards applied to their hulls, and the Geller field, which creates a bubble of reality around them, impervious to daemons and the other foul denizens of that dire and cursed realm. The most hazardous part of any journey is the transition into and out of the immaterium, and travellers are advised to spend these portions of the voyage in earnest prayer, seeking the Emperor's protection.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## THREE

Notwithstanding the dilapidated state of the *Fires of Faith*, the voyage to Nusquam Fundamentibus passed tolerably enough. Mires and his crew kept to themselves as much as possible<sup>20</sup>, which suited us fine, as we were able to concentrate on the upcoming campaign against the orks without any distracting friction between the Guard and the voiders. Even Corporal Magot failed to find someone to start a fight with, to her evident disappointment, and my unspoken relief. The pervading air of shabbiness aboard the *Fires of Faith* continued to nag at my overworked sense of unease, so any further cause for concern would have been distinctly unwelcome. I knew Kasteen and Broklaw well enough to realise that they were far from happy too, so when the message finally came down from the bridge that we were about to emerge from the warp, the air of relief among the senior command staff was palpable.

‘About time,’ Kasteen said, putting everyone’s feelings into words. She glanced at me. ‘You’ll be on the first shuttle down, I take it?’

I nodded, as though considering the matter carefully. My leaving the transport ship as early as possible had become something of a regimental tradition, at least when there was little prospect of arriving in a hot LZ<sup>21</sup>. It consolidated my reputation for leading from the front, and it gave me a running start in securing the most comfortable quarters wherever we were being billeted. On the other hand, given her eagerness and organisational ability, the first shuttle down was almost certain to contain Sulla’s command platoon, and the prospect of being subjected to her vacuous

prattle all the way down was somewhat less appealing.

‘I thought perhaps, under the circumstances, ladies first?’ I suggested. Kasteen’s impatience to get down to the desolate iceball we were destined to be stuck on for the next few months and start bagging orks as quickly as possible was more than evident, and it would have been churlish not to make the offer. She didn’t exactly do handsprings, as that would have been beneath the dignity of her uniform, but she did smile at me with considerably more warmth than I expected to find on the surface of Nusquam Fundumentibus.

‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘It’s been a while since I took point.’

Broklaw looked considerably less happy than she did, but then he’d be stuck waiting for the last run now,<sup>22</sup> dealing with all the problems you’d expect to crop up while trying to get almost a thousand men and women, along with all their kit, vehicles, and supplies, offloaded, with only enough shuttles available to handle roughly a third of that number. He was too good a soldier to argue about it, though, so he just nodded. ‘Save a couple of greenskins for me,’ he said, with slightly forced levity.

‘I’d better go and observe the transit, then,’ I said. Protocol demanded someone senior on the bridge when we shifted into or out of the warp, although, like many traditions associated with taking passage on civilian ships, the origin of the practice was long since lost in the mists of time<sup>23</sup>, and they’d both have their hands full from now on preparing for our deployment.

‘Rather you than me,’ Broklaw agreed. The last time we’d approached an iceworld on a civilian vessel we’d all crowded round the hololith on the bridge, eager to see what we were getting into, but Simia Orichalcae had turned out to be tainted in ways no one had expected, and I suppose we all wanted to make our arrival on Nusquam Fundumentibus as different as possible from the outset. (Something we definitely managed, as things turned out, but hardly in a manner any of us could have envisaged.)

The other main difference on this occasion was that the captain of the *Pure of Heart* had been so augmetically enhanced that he was practically an item of equipment; the only way Kasteen, Broklaw and I could talk to him was by visiting the bridge in person, so we’d spent rather more time there than we normally would during a voyage, and got to know him and his crew quite well. Mires, by contrast, had maintained his distance along with the rest of his matelots, so I hadn’t even set foot in the place yet. Broklaw had



observed our departure from Coronus, and had been made decidedly unwelcome; but one thing you get used to very quickly in the Commissariat is an air of sullen hostility radiating from most of the people in your vicinity, so a bit of snottiness wasn't going to bother me in the slightest.

Our deliberations were interrupted at that point by the welcome odour of fresh tanna, and the rather less welcome one of well marinaded socks, as Jurgen slouched in with a tray of refreshments. 'Will there be anything else, sir?' he asked, as he finished handing round the tea bowls, and I nodded, struck by a sudden idea.

'Yes, there would,' I said. 'I'm going to be paying a diplomatic call on the ship's captain, and I think it would be appropriate for my aide to accompany me.'

Jurgen nodded soberly, oblivious to the barely-suppressed grins on the faces of Kasteen and Broklaw. Though, at the time, I had nothing more in mind than rewarding Mires as he deserved for his discourtesy to the major, I was to be more grateful than I could have guessed for the mischievous impulse to take my aide with me. 'I'd better get tidied up, then,' he said, with considerable understatement.

Well, he made an effort, even if I was the only man aboard who knew Jurgen well enough to realise the fact. By the time he joined me in the corridor leading to the bridge, his hair had been flattened by the hopeful application of a comb with a reasonable complement of teeth left in it, and his uniform hung less askew than usual, the arms and legs of his fatigues more or less aligned with the limbs inside them for once. He still carried the usual motley collection of pouches and kit which accompanied him everywhere, slung from his torso armour on a tangle of webbing that defied conventional geometry, but for once it was hidden, beneath the traditional Valhallan greatcoat most outsiders associate with the regiments from that world, and which in actual fact they hardly ever wear<sup>24</sup>.

'Are you sure you'll need both of those?' I asked, with a nod at the weapons he carried. His lasgun was slung, as it always was, where he could grab the grip and squeeze the trigger in a heartbeat, while the melta he'd acquired on Gravalax hung across his back, to minimise the amount of time he'd spend getting the clumsy weapon hung up on low ceiling fixtures and the kind of narrow doorways which tended to be all too common on vessels of this type.

Jurgen shrugged. 'Our kit's packed up ready for loading,' he pointed out reasonably. 'I didn't have anywhere else to put it.' Meaning the melta, of course; like any Guardsman, or Guardswoman for that matter, he'd as soon be parted from his right arm as from his lasgun.

'Fair enough,' I agreed. After all, I was carrying a pair of weapons myself, although rather more discreetly; my chainsword and laspistol were as much a part of my uniform as my sash and my cap, and I'd have felt distinctly undressed without either.

Perhaps because of the amount of firepower we were carrying, the crew members we passed in the corridors seemed reluctant to engage us in conversation, even after we'd gone some considerable distance from the areas of the ship in which we'd been billeted. I'd been aboard enough starships to have some idea of where the bridge was, however, so we had no need to ask directions; which was probably just as well, as most of the people we encountered seemed too engrossed in keeping the *Fires of Faith's* ramshackle systems functioning to be distracted. If any of them seemed unduly apprehensive, I put that down to the weapons my aide and I carried so openly: only with hindsight did I begin to wonder if that had indeed been the reason.

Shipboard security was apparently as lackadaisical as the maintenance schedule, and I was just beginning to think we would get all the way to the bridge unchallenged, before our way was finally barred.

'Crew only,' an officious woman snapped at us, popping out of a nearby doorway, presumably in response to the clattering of our boot-heels on the misaligned deckplates beneath our feet. Her jacket had a bit of fraying braid on one sleeve, so she may have been an officer or somesuch in the vessel's internal hierarchy, or perhaps it had just been there when she acquired it. In either event, she regarded us in a supercilious fashion, as though our instant deferral to whatever authority she imagined she had was a foregone conclusion.

'Transit observation detail,' I replied, in a tone which remained just on the right side of politeness, even if it was lobbing rocks across the gap. 'Captain Mires should be expecting us.'

'He never said nothing to me,' the woman said, scowling. My aide smiled, in what he fondly imagined was a reassuring manner, and our would-be obstructor blenched. 'Down there,' she said, pointing. 'Big door, with "Frak off, this means you" on it.'

‘Thank you, miss,’ Jurgen said, determined to be on his best behaviour.

‘You’re welcome,’ the woman said reflexively, clearly astonished at the discovery he could speak, and now even more disconcerted if that were possible. ‘Just got to go and...’ she made an indeterminate hand gesture, ‘you know, adjust the um, whatsits.’ She beat a hasty retreat back to her lair, leaving Jurgen and I to continue our progress unmolested.

‘Well done, Jurgen,’ I said. ‘Very diplomatic.’

‘This must be it,’ my aide said, as we came to a halt before a stark metal doorway, on which the welcoming message we’d been told to expect had been daubed in red paint, and in something of a hurry judging by the irregularity of the brush strokes. There was a fairly graphic picture too, presumably intended to forestall interruption by the illiterate, which looked both painful and anatomically improbable.

I nodded, and pushed open the door, announcing our presence with a squeal of ungreased hinges.

‘Can’t you read?’ Mires greeted us, rising from his control throne, his beard bristling belligerently. For a moment I thought he was alone, the crew members I’d expected to see bustling about the place apparently absent, but a moment later I was able to pick out a number of hunched figures poring over the instrumentation mounted in a line of control lecterns behind him. A good many of the posts were dark and unmanned, and a couple more attended by servitors, which looked as decrepit as everything else I’d seen since we boarded. The chamber itself was as highly vaulted and echoing as most ship’s bridges I’d visited over the years, but the degree of illumination was considerably lower; like the corridors, several of the overhead luminators were broken, while others flickered in a manner which clearly indicated that their own failure was merely a matter of time.

‘It’s been a few minutes since the last time I did,’ I said, ‘but I don’t think I’ve lost the knack in the meantime.’ I stood aside to let Mires get the full benefit of Jurgen, noting his startled flinch with a well masked sense of satisfaction. The low light levels set off my aide’s unusual appearance to perfection, imparting a sinister aspect to the expression he fondly imagined was one of sober dignity, while the flickering glow from the large pict screen depending from the ceiling struck highlights from the weapons he carried, making them the immediate focus of everyone’s attention. ‘My aide, Gunner Jurgen. We’re here to observe the transition.’

‘Oh.’ Mires looked from one of us to the other. ‘Right.’ He tried to seize the initiative again, with a nervous glance in Jurgen’s direction, his fulsome facial hair not quite managing to conceal his growing discomfort at the realisation my aide was standing between him and the recirculators, wafting a steady draught of his unique bouquet in the direction of the control throne. ‘I’d forgotten about that.’

‘Then I’d advise you to refamiliarise yourself with the appropriate Munitorum protocols,’ I said. I hadn’t a clue what they were, any more than he did, but Mires didn’t need to know that, of course. Throne alone knew why he’d been entrusted with conveying a Guard unit into a war zone in the first place<sup>25</sup>.

‘Good point,’ he said, trying to sound conciliatory. He reseated himself with a fine show of brisk efficiency, breathing a little more shallowly through his nose. ‘Preparing for transit in... How long to transit, Kolyn?’

‘Throne knows,’ one of the bridge crew said, screwing up his eyes against the smoke rising from his lho-stick, not bothering to raise his head from the instrumentation to reply. He banged the control lectern irritably with the heel of his hand. ‘Told you we should have paid extra to have the unguents blessed.’

‘Is there a problem?’ I asked, feeling the palms of my hands beginning to tingle, in the manner they always did when my paranoia started kicking in ahead of any visible threat.

‘Course not. Everything’s fine,’ Mires assured me, a little too loudly and forcefully to be as reassuring as he’d obviously hoped.

I shot another glance at the crewman, who thumped the console again, and looked at the flickering dials with a palpable air of relief.

‘That’s got it,’ he said, working the smoking stick to the corner of his mouth, and thumbing his palm for luck<sup>26</sup>. Seeing the gesture, I tapped the comm-bead in my ear.

‘About to transit,’ I voxed on the general command channel. ‘Better brace, it’s liable to be rough.’

Well, I wasn’t wrong about that. Hardly had I finished speaking than the familiar sensation of nausea which always accompanied moving between the warp and the materium swept over me, leaving me gasping. Over the years, and innumerable journeys between worlds, I’d got reasonably accustomed to the discomfort, but on this occasion it felt very different; as though something had wrapped itself suffocatingly around me for a timeless

instant, then suddenly torn, allowing me to breathe again. The closest comparison I could think of was the moment the *Hand of Vengeance* had been ripped out of the warp in the Perlia system by a cabal of orkish psykers, but at least on this occasion I'd been spared the crippling headache which had accompanied the sensation.

'What the hell do you call that?' Mires demanded, rising wrathfully to his feet, and taking a couple of steps towards the luckless Kolyn. 'You want the cargo to think we can't run our own reaming ship properly?' Suddenly aware of what he'd just said, he glanced in my direction with a faintly apologetic air. 'No offence meant.'

'None taken,' I assured him untruthfully. The tingling in my palms was intensifying, although at first I could see nothing to account for the unease which refused to loosen its grip on me. The pict screen was showing the stars again, instead of scrolling runes, so we'd emerged from the warp, at least; I presumed one of the pinpricks of light was the sun we were now orbiting, far out on the fringes of its gravitational influence, but at this distance it would appear no different to any of the others. Struck by the obvious thought, I searched the projected image for a sign that something inimical had followed us through, but if anything had done it was smart enough to keep out of sight of the hull mounted imagifiers.

Failing to spot any traces of an external threat, I began to study our surroundings more closely, beginning with Mires, who was continuing to chew out his luckless subordinate with a vehemence and imaginative use of profanity which drew a nod of admiration from my aide. Entertaining as I might otherwise have found his diatribe, however, this was hardly the time to stop and appreciate his verbal dexterity. Unbidden, my hands dropped to the weapons at my belt.

'It wasn't my fault,' Kolyn protested, finally managing to squeeze a word in as Mires paused for breath. 'The Geller field fritzed as we came through.'

'Did it fail?' I asked urgently. I'd faced daemons before, and had no desire to do so again; the Adumbria incident was far too fresh in my memory for that.

To my relief, Kolyn shook his head. 'Just wobbled a bit.' An edge of anger entered his own voice, echoing that of his captain. 'I've been telling you the wards need reconsecrating for months.'

'Fine.' A thin beading of sweat had become visible on Mires's forehead, as it started to sink in just how close his fecklessness had come to damning us

all. 'I'll get an ecclesiarch on it as soon as we dock.'

'You'd better,' Kolyn said, in the tone of a loyal subordinate finally pushed to a decision he has no intention of being argued out of, 'but I'm still jumping ship as soon as we dock.' A few of his shipmates nodded, clearly bent on going with him. 'You don't rut around with the warp.'

'You're sure nothing could have followed us through?' I persisted, my own instinct that something was terribly wrong refusing to accept his assurances, and the brief hesitation before he nodded did little to calm my fears.

'Full status report,' Mires said, making a belated attempt to look like a captain at last, and after a fractional pause the officers around him began to comply, some grudgingly, a few with the brittle eagerness of subordinates noting a sudden unexpected vacancy in the command chain.

'There,' Mires said, as the last of them finished their litanies of gibberish, 'nothing to worry about. Everything's fine.'

'What about the rest of the stations?' I asked. 'No one's watching those.'

'Because they're not important,' Mires said, gesturing irritably at the nearest servitor, which had continued to twiddle knobs and poke levers with single-minded diligence throughout the little drama unfolding on the bridge. 'Do you think I'd leave those things in charge if they were?' He could clearly read the answer to that in my face, because he went on as though the question had been purely rhetorical, addressing the thing directly. 'Sigma seven, report.'

'All systems functioning within acceptable parameters,' the thing droned through its built-in vox-coder, and Mires turned back to me with a 'told you so' smirk.

'What about the other one?' I asked, giving it my full attention for the first time. Like its fellow, it was as decrepit as one might have expected, metalwork tarnished, and the fleshly components exhibiting a distinctly unhealthy pallor. Instead of staring dumbly at the lectern in front of it, however, it seemed to be quivering, as though in the grip of an ague. I drew my weapons in an instant, and Jurgen, following my lead as always, levelled his lasgun at it.

'Stop!' Mires shouted, horrified, before either of us could pull the trigger. 'It does that all the time. Jaren, give it a whack.'

The nearest crewman, one of the faction with an obvious eye on Kolyn's current job, strolled over and complied, fetching the thing a heavy blow

against its reinforced cranium with a dented spanner evidently kept there for the purpose. The shuddering ceased, although the half-living construct showed no sign of returning to work. It simply stood there, its misshapen head turning slowly to scan the bridge, while Jaren hovered at its shoulder, clearly debating whether or not to repeat the operation.

‘Resume designated duties,’ Mires said, in the loud, slow manner required to instruct most servitors to do pretty much anything.

‘Input initiated,’ the vox-coder droned, while its head, having turned to the right as far as it could go, began a slow traverse in the opposite direction. I’ve never been particularly spooked by servitors, unlike some who find them deeply disturbing, but the measured, deliberate movement seemed watchful, somehow, as though the shambling assemblage of flesh and technotheology was assessing us.

‘What input?’ Mires demanded. He rounded on Kolyn. ‘Have you been retasking the bloody things behind my back again?’

‘Why would I do that?’ Kolyn snapped turning to look at the servitor with irritated bafflement. ‘Specify input.’

‘Input continuing,’ the machine-thing said, and Throne strike me down if I’m exaggerating, but I could swear I heard a glimmer of expression in that flat mechanical voice. An echo of contempt and spiteful amusement. Ignoring Mires, and heedless of whatever he might have to say about it, I squeezed the trigger of my laspistol.

I can’t say I’ve had to take potshots at servitors all that often in the course of my long and inglorious career, most of the things wanting to kill me having been composed of flesh and blood (or something not too dissimilar: unless you count the necrons, of course, or some of the bizzare denizens of the warp, which aren’t exactly living in any conventional sense), but I’d been faced with combat models programmed to make a mess of my uniform on more than one occasion. That experience came in handy now, guiding my aim to one of the more vulnerable points, where the neural modulator was plugged in to the base of its skull. (A system which would have been armoured on a combat model, of course, but which civilian ones left easily accessible for routine maintenance; although I doubted that those aboard the *Fires of Faith* would have benefited much from the arrangement.) The lasbolt hit it square on, with a satisfying shower of sparks, and a spatter of blood and lubricants.

‘What the hell do you think you’re doing?’ Mires bellowed, while Jaren

squealed like a startled gretchin and jumped back, gazing down in slack-jawed astonishment at the mess on his shirt.

Instead of falling, the servitor turned to face me, its eyes alight with malign intelligence, the ruined mechanism seeming to liquefy and meld with its necrotic flesh. Power cables tore free from the lectern it manned, wrapping themselves around its limbs, while cancerous growths sprouted around and between them, absorbing the crackling flails into its body. 'Input complete,' it announced smugly. 'I've arrived.'

'Look out!' I shouted, but it was too late: the cables snaked towards the fleeing Jaren, who jerked for a moment as the current coursed through his body, before falling insensible to the deck. Unsure whether he was still living, or merely twitching by galvanic reflex, I put my next las-bolt through his head before returning my aim to the abomination taking form in front of me: it was too late to save his life, but I might still have been in time to preserve his soul.

Jurgen, of course, had needed no urging to open fire himself, and was directing burst after burst of las-bolts at the deformed monstrosity. Jaren's body was being dragged towards it, still surrounded by a nimbus of crackling energy, as much witch-fire as electricity if I was any judge<sup>27</sup>; before my horrified gaze, it too began to flow, like melting wax, blood, flesh and bone going to redouble the size of the biomechanical horror in front of us.

'Daemon on the bridge,' I voxed, my voice cracking with panic. 'We need backup. Lasguns won't stop it!'

'What can we do?' Mires asked, all bluster gone, staring at the thing in slack-jawed horror.

'Run,' I said, preparing to do the same, and wondering if I'd need to use my chainsword to get through the little knot of panic-stricken crewmen blocking the door. 'Unless you want to be next on the menu.'

Unsurprisingly, he didn't, and joined the general exodus, while Jurgen and I kept peppering the abomination before us with ineffectual las-rounds to cover the civilians' retreat. Which, as I've already admitted, was hardly my first choice of action; but I had a pretty good idea that the more the daemon fed, the stronger it would become, and saving Mires and his rabble from becoming warp spawn munchies would make an appreciable difference to my own chances of getting off the *Fires of Faith* with skin and soul intact. Besides, under the circumstances, the closer I could stick to Jurgen the



better, and by great ill fortune we'd ended up furthest from the door.

'Frak this,' Jurgen said, with what seemed to me at the time to be commendable understatement, and unslung the melta. Hardly the most suitable thing to be using on the bridge of a starship, surrounded by arcane mechanisms of all kinds, but any collateral damage we might do would be a problem for later; whereas the daemon was most definitely a problem for now. I'd faced such things before, though not often, thank the Emperor<sup>28</sup>, so I knew we couldn't kill it; but if we could inflict enough damage on the ghastly thing it would be drawn back into the warp. I closed my eyes by reflex as Jurgen pulled the trigger, and felt the backwash of heat as the glare of the discharge punched through the thin layer of skin to leave pinpricks of light dancing on my retina. Blinking them clear, I could see a few scorch marks on the metal components of the writhing abomination, but no sign of damage to its flesh, which was continuing to flow like congealing fat, twisting itself into ever more bizarre forms.

'Chaplain's on his way,' Kasteen voxed, as the last of the panicking civilians cleared the room. 'Can you keep it pinned until he gets there?'

'We can try,' I said, with an eye on the door, careful not to say anything which sounded like a promise. So far as I was concerned we could pin it down just as well from the corridor, or, better still, from one of the shuttle bays.

'It's still growing,' Jurgen said, and with a thrill of horror I realised he was right. The metal floor was softening around the daemon, lapping against its bulging calves like the swell on a beach, the very fabric of the ship itself becoming fodder for the warp-spawned monstrosity. He fired the melta again, and this time I saw the flesh bubble and spit, like over-cooked stew, before scabbing over an instant later with a carapace of metal.

The daemon laughed, an ugly sound, all the more sinister for being filtered through the mechanical larynx which had once belonged to the mindless servitor now entombed at the heart of the living cancer swelling before my eyes.

'Take out the cables!' I shouted, seeing a new, more insidious threat. The waving mechanical tendrils which had snared and electrocuted Jaren were now snaking their way towards the control lecterns: even as I watched, the nearest began burrowing into the station Kolyn had manned. I had no idea what the monstrosity before us would do if it gained control of the ship, and had even less desire to find out.

Powering up my chainsword to its maximum speed, I sheared through the cable in a shower of sparks, feeling a jolt in my arm like a kick from a Space Marine as the current it carried discharged itself through the weapon. Fortunately the hilt was insulated for just such a contingency, and most of what sparked across the gap was taken care of by my glove. I can't pretend it was an enjoyable sensation, but I had no doubt that I'd be feeling a good deal worse if the daemon managed to carry out whatever plan it had in mind.

'The cables. Right you are, sir,' Jurgen agreed, as imperturbable as ever, and set about reducing the ones he could see to slag with a series of well-placed melta blasts, while I gritted my teeth and sliced through another one, with results as uncomfortable as before.

Disconcertingly, the daemon continued to laugh the whole time, as though it was finding the whole thing a tremendous joke; a moment later I discovered why. The cable ends I'd severed were still moving, instead of having the common decency to lie still on the deck the way they should have done.

My first intimation of the unexpected danger was the sudden strike of the metallic serpents, which coiled themselves around me while my attention was on the swelling mound of flesh and metal that had spawned them. I fought for breath as the tentacles contracted, my ribs creaking, expecting to feel them crack at any moment, while I struggled fruitlessly to free the arm holding my chainsword. At least the daemon could no longer discharge electricity down the wires, apparently needing a physical connection for that, but as the grey mist hovered in front of my eyes, that was scant comfort. Dimly, I felt myself drawn towards the hideous entity, inchoate terror pounding at my temples, as it prepared to devour my very soul.

Then, abruptly, I felt the constricting bands of metal falling away, and discovered I could breathe again; a mixed blessing, as my gasps brought with them a strong and familiar odour.

'It's all right sir,' Jurgen said, pulling the last coil away, and dropping it on the floor, where it lay reassuringly inert. 'They come off easy enough.' Which indeed they had, although I doubted whether anyone else could have managed it, devoid as they were of his peculiar talent<sup>29</sup>. Just to make sure, he reduced them to a puddle of slag with a quick melta blast, before turning to face the ghastly mound of flesh and metal again.

'Fall back,' I said, seeing our path to the door clear at last, and cracking off

a couple of shots as I made for it. The daemon moved swiftly to cut us off then, as I'd hoped, flinched back at the last moment as it came within range of whatever it was about Jurgen so many denizens of the Cursed Realm found so disturbing. As it did so, he fired the melta again, and this time the damage he did remained, an ugly cauterised scar across its flesh, the softened metal licked by the beam glowing red in the dimly-lit bridge. For the first time it stopped laughing, and a roar of anger and revulsion echoed around the chamber.

'Stick close to it,' I said, seeing the tiny pockmarks left by my laspistol bolts remaining on the distended skin, instead of fading as they had done before. The same thing had happened when we'd fought the daemon on Adumbria, I recalled, with a faint flicker of hope; but then we'd had the massed firepower of an entire company concentrated on the abomination, with Jurgen somehow nullifying its ability to heal itself, and even then it had been a close run thing.

I hesitated, wondering whether we should make the best of the tiny advantage we had, and hope to the Throne we could find a way to exploit it, or simply make a run for it while we still had the chance. Before I could make up my mind, however, the clatter of boots in the corridor and a resonant voice chanting arcane gibberish in High Gothic did it for me; I could hardly let the troopers see the legendary Ciaphas Cain heading for the saviour pods, and expect them to watch my back in the future. So as the chaplain and whichever squad had been unlucky enough to be found by him on the way up burst into the bridge I turned back to face the looming pile of flesh and mechanica, flourishing my chainsword in an appropriately heroic manner. By great good fortune I happened to catch a lump of flesh protruding from between two chunks of metal, and severed it in a suitably dramatic spray of ichor.

'Commissar! Get down!' Chaplain Tope bellowed, in a voice accustomed to carrying to the far corners of a chapel without the benefit of a magnavox, and I complied at once, Jurgen following my lead as always. Several small objects arced over my head, bursting against the daemon, which shrieked in a most satisfying fashion; as I rose to my feet, I could see great swathes of it hissing and bubbling, the flesh liquefying, and the metal subliming into froth.

'Acid?' I asked, perplexed, wondering where he could have found so much of the stuff, and Tope laughed, in what sounded like honest amusement.

‘Holy water,’ he said. ‘Blessed it myself. Good, eh?’

Well, I could hardly argue with that; I’ve little enough time for Emperor-botherers in the normal course of events, but I can’t deny they have their uses at moments like this. Before I could thank him, the screaming daemon lashed out in our direction, ripping a couple of the lecterns from the floor, and battering a handful of the newly-arrived troopers against the wall with them.

‘Look out!’ I warned, ducking again in the nick of time as a flailing tendril of melting flesh hurtled in our direction. I caught it a good one with the chainsword on the way past, but the whirling blade simply tore a gash along the length of it; despite my best efforts it struck Tope full on, with enough force to dent a Chimera, and sent him skidding away across the deck.

‘It can’t do that to a man of the Emperor!’ Jurgen said, in tones of outraged piety, letting fly with the melta again, this time managing to punch a hole the size of his head deep into the daemon’s guts. I don’t know how much of the damage was due to his own ability, and how much to the chaplain’s spiritual assault on the thing<sup>30</sup>, but in any event it looked like the *coup de grace*; the towering abomination staggered, and crashed to the deck, assisted on its way by a volley of lasgun fire from the assembled troopers.

‘Flamers!’ Tope bellowed, scrambling to his feet with the aid of the nearest lectern, and adjusting the Guard-issue helmet he’d adorned with his rosarius to an incongruously jaunty angle<sup>31</sup>. Not for the first time, it seemed, his badge of office had protected him where lesser, or less pious, men would not have been so fortunate. ‘Finish it!’

Since I couldn’t argue with that, I stood aside, while a trio of troopers with incendiary weapons hosed the fallen giant down with blazing promethium, blistering the air in the suddenly smaller seeming chamber. The flames roared up, burning with an unhealthy bluish tinge, which reminded me once again of witchfire. The daemon’s bellows were growing weaker, and it thrashed about futilely, making even more of a mess of the bridge controls if that were possible.

‘It’s shrinking!’ I said, hardly daring to believe it, and shot a couple more pistol rounds into the spasming inferno, more for the sake of appearances than because I expected it to do any good.

‘Losing its grip on the material plane,’ Tope said, advancing, and beginning to recite the Rite of Exorcism. So far as I know he’d never had to perform one before, but he threw himself into it with rather more relish than

I would have expected. Jurgen helped it along with a final melta blast, and the hideous thing suddenly vanished, with a sharp *crack!* of imploding air.

I looked around at the wreckage of the bridge, which had suddenly fallen silent, except for the groans of the wounded, and the faint crackle of the small fires scattered here and there, where spilled promethium from the flamers was slowly burning itself out. Hardly a control station seemed left intact.

‘I’d better perform a full cleansing ritual before we let the crew back in,’ Tope said after a moment, and I nodded, still trying to take in the extent of the devastation.

‘If you think there’s any point,’ I said. ‘They can hardly fly the ship from here now.’

A cold knot of fear began winding itself tightly around my stomach as I finished speaking, and the full import of my own words sank in. Barring a miracle, the *Fires of Faith* had just become a coffin for us all.



## FOUR

‘Nothing else for it. We’ll have to evacuate the ship,’ I said decisively. The weeks I’d spent aboard a saviour pod in the Perlia system hadn’t exactly been comfortable, but were infinitely more so than the attempt to breathe vacuum which had immediately preceded them. On the other hand, the saviour pods aboard the *Fires of Faith* were probably just as decrepit as the rest of the vessel: trusting ourselves to them would be an act of desperation, but right now I couldn’t see any alternative.

‘Can’t be done,’ Mires said, looking from me, to Kasteen, to Broklaw, and back, like a gretchin ordered to rustle up a snack for a trio of hungry orks and having to admit that the larder was empty. ‘We’ve got enough saviour pods for the crew, but—’

‘Barely a tenth of what we need for the regiment,’ Kasteen cut in, sounding perfectly happy to leave Mires and his people aboard the crippled hulk to suffocate or starve. Maybe she was: it was their incompetence which had landed us in this mess, after all. But that would still leave most of our own people flapping in the breeze, and the Guard didn’t abandon its own; we’d find a way out of this for everyone, or go down together. Or at least the Valhallans would; I’ve always found ‘every man for himself’ more to my taste. ‘What about the shuttles?’

‘Still standing by to take us off,’ Broklaw said, which sounded a little more encouraging. ‘The problem is, they were expecting us to make a stable orbit first.’ He turned back to Mires, who squirmed visibly. ‘And our chances of that are...?’

‘Not good,’ the captain admitted, with another horrified glance at the devastated bridge surrounding us. It was swarming with crewmen and artificers, conversing with one another in the clipped and incomprehensible dialect of the specialist, but they were completely out of their depth and they knew it. ‘We’re trying to get the manoeuvring system reconsecrated, but that’s really a job for a tech-priest.’

‘There’s a Mechanicus shrine in Primadelving,’ Broklaw said, having waded through the briefing documents like a good executive officer should, so Kasteen and I could get away with skimming them as cursorily as possible. ‘If they could get a party of tech-priests up here, could they restore the damage in time?’

‘They might,’ Mires said, looking a lot more hopeful all of a sudden. He pulled out a data-slate, and rattled through a series of calculations. Then his face fell again. ‘Couldn’t make the rendezvous,’ he said, holding out the tiny screen for us to read. Then, realising we couldn’t all see it, he transferred the data to the big pict screen, which, by some miracle, had survived the mayhem wreaked all around it.

‘What is this?’ Kasteen asked, frowning at the complex diagram.

‘Orbital mechanics,’ Mires said, a measure of his old cockiness beginning to return, until I let my hand rest lightly on the hilt of my chainsword. ‘This is us, see?’ A stylised silhouette of a starship marked our position, its projected course indicated by a green line, which intersected with the circle marking Nusquam Fundamentibus somewhere towards the corner of the screen. Another line showed the motion of the planet, forward and back, like a bead on an abacus<sup>32</sup>. ‘Anything coming out from the planet would have to shoot past us, turn around, and catch up. Can’t dock without matching velocities.’

‘We know that much,’ I said, trying not to sound too impatient with him. ‘We’ve spent enough time on shuttles transferring to starships. What’s the problem?’

‘Our speed,’ Mires said, looking distinctly uncomfortable again. ‘Even at full burn, a shuttle could never catch up with us.’

‘Then we need to slow down,’ Broklaw said, never afraid of stating the obvious. ‘How do we do that?’

‘Get the engines going again,’ Mires said. ‘Then use the manoeuvring thrusters to flip ourselves over. Burn the main engine along the course we’re following.’ He did something to the slate in his hand, and the starship

icon (which looked a great deal more sleek and efficiently handled than its real life counterpart) dutifully did a backflip. He attempted a hopeful smile, which flickered and died again, in the face of our refusal to be mollified. 'We can fire them up again from the enginarium, so we won't have to wait for the control linkages to be reestablished from the bridge.'

'Which leaves the thrusters,' I said. 'How long until they're back in commission?' I watched Mires's face contort, as he tried to find an answer which didn't immediately translate as 'we're frakked.' 'Never mind,' I added, before he could speak. 'Too long, obviously.'

'What about the on-board shuttles?' Kasteen asked. 'You must have some, right?' We'd arrived aboard heavy cargo lifters operated by the Munitorum on Coronus, and expected to be taken off again by whatever was available at our destination. But every civilian vessel I'd ever travelled on carried auxiliary craft of some kind. Surely even the *Fires of Faith* wouldn't be an exception to that.

Mires shrugged. 'We've got two,' he said at last. 'Utility boats. We could maybe cram ten or twelve people into them.'

'That's ten or twelve fewer,' I pointed out, already determined to find a good reason to be among them if necessary. 'If there's time to make enough runs...'

Mires smirked openly at my ignorance. 'They could get off all right. But they couldn't get back, any more than the ones you were expecting.'

'I suppose not,' I said, my attention drawn back, despite itself, to the pict screen hanging over our heads. It may just have been my imagination, but the little starship icon seemed incrementally nearer to the bulk of the planet already.

I can't pretend the next couple of weeks passed at all easily; the *Fires of Faith* continued to hurtle like a bullet towards Nusquam Fundamentibus, despite the best efforts of Mires and his crew to restore the damage done to the ship by the manifesting daemon. Their diligence was impressive, particularly after Kasteen had taken the precaution of posting armed guards outside the saviour pods and the shuttle bay, but futile for all that; every time they got one of the systems restored, it simply revealed another malfunction somewhere else.

The team working on the engines had the best results, probably because we'd let our own cogboys<sup>33</sup> loose down there, but it was a Pyrrhic victory;



until we were able to turn round, and use them to slow our headlong rush towards the surface of the planet, firing them up would simply make us crash faster.

‘Or would it?’ Mires asked, when I voiced the thought, becoming unexpectedly animated as he considered it. He pulled out his data-slate, and started fiddling with it again. ‘We’d be cutting it a bit fine, but...’

‘But what?’ I demanded.

‘I should have seen it.’ The captain handed me the slate, as much of his expression as I could see behind his beard appropriately rueful. ‘But we’ve been so fixated on finding a way to slow down I never realised. We can speed up instead.’

‘And ram the planet tomorrow instead of the day after?’ I asked sarcastically, trying to make sense of his diagram. It looked almost identical to the one he’d displayed on the bridge screen a fortnight before, except that the ship and the planet were unmistakably much closer than they had been. Involuntarily, I glanced up at the big pict, which was showing the view from outside again; by now the sun was a visible disc, and although I knew it was still impossible to make out from this distance, I somehow managed to convince myself that one of the pinpricks of light nearby was the world we were so close to colliding with.

‘Not quite.’ Mires did something to the slate. ‘If we accelerate enough, we might just reach that volume of space before the planet does.’ The green line denoting the *Fires of Faith*’s future course seemed to move a little, then broke free of the globe, grazing the edge of it.

‘And go sailing off into the void even more quickly than the rescue craft can get to us,’ I said.

Mires shrugged. ‘We’d have more time for repairs, at least. But if we juggle the thrust right we’ll graze the upper atmosphere.’

‘And incinerate ourselves,’ I said sarcastically. ‘Better and better.’

‘Ship’s tougher than that,’ Mires said. ‘You wouldn’t want to be in any of the outer decks. But the middle ones ought to be survivable.’ The green line bent, while I tried not to think too hard about the implications of *ought to be*. ‘It’ll take good timing, and even better luck. But look.’ The line had begun to curl back on itself, which ought to mean...’

‘We’d be in orbit,’ I said.

Mires nodded. ‘A long, elliptical one. Take us months to get back. Supplies would be low, and the air pretty thick. But we should have got

control again by then.'

'And if we haven't, we'll have slowed enough for the shuttles to take us off,' I finished.

'Exactly,' Mires said, looking cheerful for the first time since our initial meeting in the docking bay. He glanced at me, anxiously seeking approval, clearly not wanting to sign off on such an insanely risky course of action alone. 'You want to run this by your people before we get started?'

I shook my head. I already knew what Kasteen and Broklaw would say; a slender chance of survival would be better than none as I'd proven for myself on far too many occasions. I sighed, trying not to wonder if this time would turn out to be the exception. 'Just do it,' I said, hoping I hadn't killed us all a day early.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## FIVE

The bridge was still looking more like a collection of scrap than a functioning command centre, but a few more of the lecterns had been patched together and hastily manned by the time I took my seat as close to Mires's control throne as I could. My chair seemed solid enough, welded to the deck behind one of the shattered crew stations which hadn't been brought back into operation yet, and which would give me something to cling on to if the worst happened, which I was morbidly convinced it would. From where I sat I had a clear view of the pict screen, which at the moment was showing rather too much of the rapidly-approaching planet for my peace of mind, and, more importantly, a clear view of Mires: though it would be scant consolation, I'd privately determined that if things did go terminally ploin-shaped, he'd get to the Golden Throne a few minutes ahead of the rest of us.

'How are we doing?' I asked him, gripping the arms of my seat as I spoke, sure my augmetic fingers were leaving dents in the metalwork<sup>34</sup>. I kept my voice light, though, and I was careful to slump a little against the worn and lumpy padding, so I'd look more at ease than I actually was.

'Ready as we'll ever be,' he responded, sounding a lot more like how I really felt than I did.

'Best get to it, then,' I said, reflecting that as last words went, they sounded remarkably prosaic. Perhaps I should have made a run for the saviour pods, now the guards had been withdrawn in anticipation of the outer decks becoming hotter than a baker's oven, while I'd had the chance;

but if this ridiculous stratagem succeeded despite the odds, the Commissariat would have me packed off to a penal legion for desertion almost as soon as I hit the ground. At least if I died today my reputation would remain intact, much good it would do me.

By this time, the mottled white mass of the planet had grown to fill almost the entire screen: a second later the horizon line disappeared altogether, leaving nothing but the face of the planet towards which we were plummeting. Even in my most pessimistic imaginings, I'd had no idea we were as close to annihilation as that.

'Give it everything you've got!' Mires barked down the speaking tube to the enginarium, and, in spite of the on-board gravity field fluctuating to compensate, I could swear I'd felt a sudden surge of extra acceleration. Highly unlikely, of course, as the engines had been flat out ever since he'd suggested this insane manoeuvre, but perhaps his sweating subordinates had managed to wring a little more out of them by sheer willpower.

'Ciaphas,' Kasteen voxed, an undercurrent of tension in her voice which, under the circumstances, I could hardly blame her for. 'What's happening?'

'We're about to hit the atmosphere,' I said. 'Is everyone secure?' Even *in extremis*, I remembered to sound as though I cared about the welfare of the troopers; in the unlikely event of us getting out of this mess, we'd be going into action against the orks before too long, and I wanted to be sure they'd watch my back for me when we did.

'As secure as we can manage,' Kasteen said. 'We've welded the Chimeras to the deck, and padded them inside with as much bedding and other stuff as we can find. We're packed in like preserved rations, but we should survive the worst of the buffeting.'

'Glad to hear it,' I replied, hoping that an outward show of confidence would keep morale as high as possible under the circumstances. Gradually, to my inexpressible relief, the curve of the horizon reappeared in the pict screen, a faint sliver of black drifting up from the bottom left hand corner.

'Come on! Come on!' Mires urged, as if the *Fires of Faith* were a recalcitrant pack mule needing to be cajoled.

'It seems to be working,' I told Kasteen after a few more minutes of tense anticipation, the huge sense of relief I felt no doubt evident in my tone.

Confident that our headlong plunge to oblivion had been arrested, I began studying the face of the world we were approaching, hoping to pick out some landmark I recognised. By now our ventral hull plating was beginning

to glow a dull ackenberry red, the haze of ionising air rising all round the external imagifers, and all I could discern on the planet below us were a few patches of grey murk, which were probably just clouds dropping a fresh load of snow onto the already frigid landscape beneath them.

‘Hang on,’ Mires cautioned, ‘it’s going to get rough.’ Something I’d already deduced for myself; despite the best efforts of whoever was trying to keep the internal gravity stable, the ship was beginning to judder around us as the tenuous upper atmosphere clawed at her keel.

My grip tightened on the armrests again. ‘How much longer?’ I asked, trying not sound as worried as I felt.

‘Just a few minutes,’ Mires said, his voice betraying the euphoria of a gambler who has just bet the pot on a low scoring hand, and is beginning to realise everyone else’s is even worse. ‘We’re about to bounce back into space.’

At that moment, a darker speck appeared against the face of the iceball. I leaned forward in my borrowed seat, trying to get a clearer view of it. ‘What’s that?’ I asked.

Mires began to look as though one of the other players had just drawn a pair of inquisitors. His face, or at least the portion of it I could see beneath his beard, paled. ‘The orbital docks,’ he said.

‘They’re not that big, are they?’ I asked, as the horizon line continued to crawl across the pict screen. The dot moved with it, passing into the blackness of space, where it immediately began to shine like a bright star, smack in the middle of the screen.

‘Big enough,’ Mires said grimly.

I stared at the swelling image of the docks in the pict screen as we approached. The vast structure seemed to be growing with every passing heartbeat, and a quick glance at the auspex on the lectern next to mine was enough to confirm that we were hurtling towards it at a speed which would reduce both it and us to a cloud of scrap if we collided. The blip marking the void station was dead ahead of us, a couple of smaller, moving echoes nearby probably vessels casting off hastily in an attempt to scurry out of our way while they still could. They were even visible on the pict, or so I managed to convince myself, the faint glow of their engines moving slowly against the starfield.

‘Are we going to hit it or not?’ I demanded, my horrified gaze fixed on the

orbital station, which now all but filled the screen. I was able to make out individual spires and docking arms by now, and a handful of ships like our own, which for whatever reason had apparently elected to remain despite the danger<sup>35</sup>.

‘I’ve no idea,’ Mires said, chewing his lip nervously. I felt my fingers closing around the arms of my chair again, as though I had hold of his neck. ‘It’s going to be close.’

Fat lot of help that was. ‘Can we use the utility boats’ engines to nudge us off course?’ I asked.

‘If we could we’d already have done it,’ Mires said dismissively, but right then I was too terrified to take offence. ‘It’d do about as much good as climbing out an airlock and farting.’

‘If the hatches haven’t been welded shut by our skip through the atmosphere,’ Kolyn added, glaring at his captain from behind the auspex station.

‘Academic anyway,’ Mires said, his gaze fixed on the station ahead of us. As the image grew, I began to appreciate just how vast and complex the city-sized structure we were hurtling towards was. The larger features I’d noticed before, the great central mass and the docking arms protruding from it, making the whole thing resemble nothing so much as a huge metallic starfish, took on texture, each blemish the size of a hab block. Auspex and vox arrays depended from them, like vines on a ruined citadel, and I began to discern innumerable smaller craft scurrying between them, like insects round a nest. If our own vox antennae hadn’t been sheared off by our recent dive through the atmosphere, I’d no doubt a barrage of panic-stricken messages would be echoing through the bridge by now.

‘Cut power to three, five and seven,’ Mires barked, and I felt a sudden vertiginous lurch, as the unseen toilers in the enginarium complied with with his order. ‘And sort that damned gravity out!’

The huge bulk of the void station began to drift away from the centre of the screen now, and I felt a sudden flare of renewed hope. ‘Whatever you’ve just done, it seems to be working<sup>36</sup>,’ I said, although he seemed to have cut it a bit fine for my liking<sup>37</sup>.

‘We’re not clear yet,’ Mires said, gripping his arm rests as tightly as I was clenching mine. I held my breath, as one of the docking arms swept in from the corner of the screen, edge on to our bow. ‘We’re not going to make it!’

‘Brace!’ I voxed, an instant before we struck it a glancing blow, which

made the old ship clang like a cathedral bell. The deck juddered beneath me, and half the luminators in the ceiling blew, showering us with broken glass; a second later harsh red emergency lighting replaced them, bathing us all in blood.

A glittering cloud of venting atmosphere burst from the docking arm as we tore a great gash along it, and debris began haemorrhaging into space from the wound we'd inflicted. Chunks of metal, cargo containers, and what looked uncomfortably like bodies, blizzarded past the imagifer, then we were clear.

'What was that?' Kasteen voxed, too disciplined to add to the babble of profanity echoing round the bridge, although I doubt that I'd have been so restrained myself in her place.

'We hit the orbital,' I said. 'But we seem to be in one piece.'

'Hull breached in sections Gamma two and Beta three,' Kolyn reported a moment later. 'Emergency bulkheads holding.'

'We've still got air, anyway,' Mires said, his eyes fixed on the pict screen. The stars had become a whirling kaleidoscope, and the ominous bulk of the planet rolled regularly across the screen. I'd seen the same thing in the saviour pod I'd left the *Hand of Vengeance* in so precipitately, so I didn't have to ask what was going on; we were tumbling, unable to correct our course or steady ourselves without the manoeuvring thrusters. 'Any casualties?'

'Not so far,' Kolyn said. 'The outer decks were still too hot for anyone to be there.' He shrugged, and gestured at the planet looming over us all. The hull was already beginning to glow red again, and the same faint wisps of ionising atmosphere I'd seen before were beginning to curl around it. 'Not that it matters. We'll all die together when we hit.'



## SIX

It wasn't the first time I'd arrived on a planet the hard way, of course. Our saviour pod had reached Perlia with most of its braking systems inoperative, after an orkish fighter pilot had used it for a spot of target practice as we'd entered the atmosphere, and the last time I'd set foot on an iceworld, the shuttle I'd been on had fallen victim to a lucky bit of speculative anti-aircraft fire on the way down, but I'd never crashed in anything even a tenth as massive as a starship. I'd like to be able to claim that the experience was less traumatic, but in truth it was just as terrifying as the previous occasions on which I'd first greeted a new world by knocking a dent in it.

Once again, the saviour pod I'd earmarked crossed my mind as a potential alternative to remaining aboard, but by now we were well within the upper levels of the atmosphere, which would render launching it risky at best; not to mention the fact that I'd probably fry before I got close enough to board the thing anyway.

I rose from my seat for a moment, unbuckled my belt, and refastened it around the back of the chair to fashion a makeshift restraint. No point in falling out if I could help it. No sooner had I finished the operation than I felt a tremor run through the entire hull. 'What was that?' I asked, trying to keep a note of alarm from my voice.

'Thermal shock,' Kolyn said brusquely. 'The outer hull's heating up faster than the core, so it's expanding unevenly. We'll be getting some stress failures before long.'



‘You mean we’re falling apart?’ I asked, feeling a flare of panic. My chest felt constricted, the air harder to breathe, and after a moment I realised with some relief that this was because the temperature on the bridge was beginning to rise, not merely a response to the stress.

‘I hope not,’ Mires said grimly. ‘Just minor stuff.’

‘That’s reassuring,’ I said sarcastically as the buffeting increased, despite the best efforts of the beleaguered engineers to keep the gravity constant. If it failed, our tumbling progress through the atmosphere would fling us about like grox steaks in a blender, and with much the same result. No doubt Jurgen’s tender stomach was considerably put out by now; reminded by association of the thousand or so troopers accompanying him, I vox-cast a few appropriate platitudes, along with a suitably redacted report of our current position. ‘We’re still in one piece,’ I told them, ‘and descending slowly. If we all keep our heads we’ll be fine.’ Which was a bit of a stretch, even for me.

With the crimson glare of the emergency luminators, and the steadily rising temperature, the bridge was beginning to resemble the inside of a bake oven by now. I blinked a few drops of sweat from my eyes, and tried to focus on the pict screen, although the picture it was relaying from the outside was far from reassuring; the vessel’s superstructure was flowing like candle wax, the spires and turrets protruding from the main hull softening under the incredible heat of atmospheric friction, or simply ablating away to join the comet tail of debris spiralling in our wake. I found myself blessing the foresight of whichever naval architect had seen fit to site the bridge and engine room so close to the middle of the hull<sup>38</sup>.

Our tumbling progress through the atmosphere, and the nimbus of plasma surrounding us, made it hard to distinguish anything much beyond the hull, but it seemed to me that the horizon line on the pict screen was no longer curved. In fact it was looking positively jagged, and my bowels clenched as I divined the reason. ‘Those are mountains!’ I said. ‘Can we get over them?’

‘Throne knows,’ Mires replied, gripping an aquila medallion so tightly I could see blood oozing from his fist. The vast bulk of the ship groaned, and we lurched violently, throwing me against my makeshift restraint.

‘What the hell was that?’ I asked without thinking, only becoming aware that I’d voiced the thought when Kolyn replied.

‘Primary power relays just shorted out,’ he reported. ‘Everything’s being

channelled to gravitics.’ Which was the only reason we weren’t all dead already.

I took another glance at the screen, too terrified to tear my gaze away. We were low enough by now to be whipping up a hypersonic blizzard in our wake, ripping a gash though metres of ice and permafrost, while the atmospheric bow wave ahead of us pulverised the landscape. A few scrawny conifers clinging hopefully to the snow-encrusted slopes were whirled aside in an instant, mashed to kindling, and then, with a thunderclap like the wrath of the Emperor Himself, the hammerblow of air slammed against the wall of rock facing us.

The whole mountain seemed to stagger from the impact, the slopes in our immediate vicinity scoured of their covering of ice and snow in a heartbeat, boulders smashed to gravel an instant after that. Flung into the air, the largest pieces of debris clanged against our hull in an ominous carillon.

‘We’re almost down,’ I voxed to the sweating troopers below decks, all too aware of how alarming it would sound to them, ‘and running into a few pebbles being thrown up by our slipstream. Hang on, and brace for impact.’

The looming peaks were towering over us on both sides now, although it was hard to make out any details of the topography we were so comprehensively rearranging. At least we weren’t likely to hit anyone; from what I remembered, most Nusquans remained comfortably tucked up in their cavern cities as much as they could, only venturing onto the surface when they absolutely had to. There might be orks around, of course, if the mountains we were skimming over were the Great Spinal Range, where the majority of the greenskins had gone to ground, but if we were doing them any harm it just served them right for being on somebody else’s planet in the first place so far as I could see.

We ricocheted off a low-lying ridge, ripping another gash in our battered hull, then mercifully there were no more peaks barring our way. The pict screen was blinded by flying debris and whirling snow, our altitude no more than a few tens of metres, and, praise the Emperor, a huge expanse of clear ice fields suddenly opened out ahead of us through the murk. I just had time to vox a final warning to the troopers, getting as far as ‘Everyone brace! We’re about to–’ when we did, with an impact which jarred up my spine like a kick from a Dreadnought, rattling the fillings in my teeth.

A second or two later I felt a second impact, then a third and a fourth, each gouging out a canyon a score or more kilometres long in the permafrost;

how many times we bounced I couldn't have said, but each dissipated a little more of our momentum, and after a while the succession of hammerblows to my sacrum was replaced by a continuous juddering, which would undoubtedly have been a great deal more disconcerting had I not become accustomed to riding in a Salamander being driven by Jurgen over the years. It was hard to make out much on the snow-blinded pict screen, but so far as I could tell we were sliding in a cloud of steam, melting a channel in the ice about three quarters the depth of our hull, the temperature of which was visibly falling by the moment, the searing heat of atmospheric entry being leached away by the chill surrounding us. We'd finally reached a stable orientation too, more or less the right way up, for which I was more than grateful when our much abused gravity systems finally failed, hurling those crewmen who hadn't had the sense to lash themselves down the way I had into the corners of the bridge like so many sacks of meat.

Eventually the shaking subsided, until I finally realised that the residual tremors I could feel were just in my much abused muscles, and I fought my way free of my improvised seat restraint. The floor was canted at an angle, which unbalanced me for a moment, and I hung on to my chair for support.

'We're down,' I voxed, although I assumed that would be obvious. 'Many casualties?'

'Enough,' Kasteen said brusquely, so I didn't press her for details, content just to bask in the unexpected glory of my own survival.

'Medicae to the bridge,' Kolyn ordered, through some internal vox-system, and Throne knows they needed it; although I'd have laid pretty low odds on any surviving medicae among the crew having the time to respond. His face was pale, and he seemed to be nursing a broken arm; which put him among the healthiest of the civilian survivors that I could see.

'Lucky you resigned while the going was good,' I said, with a glance at the devastation surrounding us. Mires was still slumped in his control throne, and I tottered towards him across the sloping deck; to this day I couldn't tell you whether I was minded to congratulate him or finish him off for getting us into this mess in the first place. But in the event I was spared having to choose; his eyes were wide and sightless. Somewhere in the jarring succession of impacts he'd broken his worthless neck.

The deck shifted abruptly, and I turned my attention to the pict screen, trying to get a sense of wherever we'd ended up. The image which met my eyes was hard to interpret, everything shrouded in mist, but instead of the

jagged icefields and drifting snow I remembered from my last visit to this benighted world, we seemed to be surrounded by a low, flat surface, which undulated gently about us in all directions. Now we'd stopped moving, the heat from our hull was leaching out into the ice, melting it.

Despite my initial incredulity, there could be absolutely no doubt – we were in the middle of a lake. And that meant...

‘Emperor’s bones!’ I expostulated. ‘We’re sinking!’

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## SEVEN

‘Not right away,’ Kolyn assured me. ‘Most of the pressure doors are holding.’

‘But the hull’s got more holes in it than a heretic’s sermon,’ I rejoined. It would be flooding in through the gashes left by our collisions with the orbital station and the peak we’d bounced off, let alone all the innumerable minor ruptures where rivets had sheared and plates bent as we’d skittered across the icefields like a stone on a pond. Not to mention the stress fractures and buckled buttresses inside where the structure had been fatally weakened by the furnace heat of our fiery plunge through the atmosphere. As if to confirm my darkest fears, the battered hulk lurched beneath my feet even as I spoke, a sudden shift in the angle of the deck playing momentary havoc with my inner ear.

‘Make for the ventral docking bay,’ Kasteen voxed on the general command channel, ‘and assemble by platoon.’

‘Good call,’ I told her, already making for the door, leaving the crew to shift for themselves. Those who still could, anyway. ‘The higher we are, the more time we buy.’

‘And it’s big enough to hold everyone without any shuttles docked,’ Broklaw added, which was also true; it would be a bit of a squeeze, with a thousand troopers packed in there, but we’d manage.

‘What about the vehicles?’ Sulla cut in. ‘They’re still welded down.’

‘We’ll recover them later,’ I assured her, hoping we’d get the chance. ‘People come first, then the kit.’ With me as the person I most had in mind.

I found my way up through the maze of twisted corridors easily enough, my instinctive affinity for confined spaces proving as reliable as ever, making good time despite the buckled deckplates and collapsed ceilings which periodically blocked my path. Nevertheless, my sense of unease grew steadily, as the faint oscillation of the deckplates beneath my boots, caused by the shattered starship continuing to wallow in the lake it had created, became ever more pronounced. The periodic lurches became stronger, the intervals between them ever shorter, and I could picture the cause all too easily: the accumulated pressure of the water forcing its way past barriers which had held it temporarily in check, bursting through them in unstoppable torrents, to flood another series of compartments, as it had done in our stricken submersible beneath the waves of Kosnar.

Well, I hadn't drowned then, and I wasn't about to now, at least if I could help it. Clearing a path with my chainsword whenever the detritus impeding my progress became too irksome to squeeze through, I forged ahead, the audible trickle of water in the distance spurring me on.

'How are you doing?' I voxed, turning away from a dead end of tangled debris too large to break through. Perhaps I should have stuck with the civilians, I thought belatedly – they might have known a faster route.

'We've reached the docking bay,' Kasteen replied at once, 'but the loading doors won't open.'

'Welded shut by the heat of entry,' I said, recalling Kolyn's words on the bridge.

'Looks like it,' she said, clearly more concerned with the effect than with its cause. 'But Federer thinks he can blast our way out.'

Which didn't surprise me. Captain Federer, the officer commanding our contingent of sappers, had an enthusiasm for all things explosive which bordered on the unhealthy; but he was undeniably an expert where demo charges were concerned. 'He'd know,' I agreed, feeling rather more confident that we'd be able to get out of the slowly sinking tomb we were trapped in. If only I could find my way up to join them. I took another passageway, which seemed to be running in the right direction, and found my feet sloshing in a few centimetres of icy-cold water. 'Better tell him to get a move on. The water's rising fast down here.'

I spotted a ladder, giving access to a ceiling hatch halfway along the corridor, and jogged towards it, the water already level with my ankles. As I began to clamber up, a hollow booming noise echoed along the passageway,

and the whole ship shuddered. I knew at once what that meant; the bulkhead through which the water had been trickling had abruptly given way.

Galvanised by an adrenaline rush of pure terror, I scrambled to the top and heaved at the hatchway above me, yanking at the release handle with all my strength, but the blasted thing refused to budge. A wall of water appeared at the end of the passageway, hurtling towards me like a charging krootox; I reached for my chainsword with some half-formed notion of attempting to hack my way through, already aware that it was too late, and that in a heartbeat I was going to be swept to my death.

Then the hatchway abruptly gave, and burst open. Welcome hands, accompanied by a no less welcome odour, reached down to haul me out.

‘Up you come, sir,’ Jurgen said, as I popped out of the hole, propelled by a piston of melt-water. Between us we wrestled the hatch closed against the pressure of the fountain which had followed me through, and I blinked at my deliverance in astonishment.

‘Why aren’t you with the others?’ I asked him, energetically plying the towel he’d produced from among his collection of pouches. We must have been somewhere near the outer hull by now; the air temperature was more than humid, and my drying clothes left me wreathed in a cloud of steam as I followed him back towards the docking bay.

‘I came to look for you,’ Jurgen said, as though it should have been obvious. ‘Heard you banging on that lid thing.’

‘Thank the Throne you did,’ I said, as we entered the vast echoing chamber, full of Valhallans grouped into their platoons as Kasteen had ordered. The medicae were busy in one corner, treating those who’d come off worst when we hit the ground; clearly not all were expected to make it, as Tope was there too, making the sign of the aquila. There were no body bags to be seen, so either someone had been tactful enough to keep them out of sight, or the fatalities had simply been left behind in the rush.

‘We’ve not got long,’ I told Kasteen, as the ship lurched again. ‘The water’s only a couple of levels below us.’

She nodded, and tapped her comm-bead. ‘Federer. Now would be good.’

‘Just setting the last of the charges,’ the sapper told us, a disquieting note of eagerness discernible in his voice, even through the miniature vox-unit.

‘How many have you used?’ I asked, trying to sound as though the enquiry was merely a casual one.

‘Enough,’ Federer said, his attention no doubt entirely absorbed by the strip of det tape he was carefully peeling off the reel.

‘You made it,’ Broklaw said, emerging from the crowd at my elbow, and I nodded, trying to look as relaxed as I could under the circumstances, which was probably not all that much, come to think of it<sup>39</sup>.

Before I could answer him, Federer bellowed ‘Fire in the hole!’ with what I can only describe as unseemly enthusiasm.

Broklaw and I flinched, along with pretty much every other trooper present, and ducked back, pressing our hands to our ears. Instead of the blast we’d expected, however, there was simply a loud *crack!*, like a lascannon popping off a single round, and a faint smell of burned fyceline.

‘It hasn’t worked,’ I started to say, and took a couple of steps towards Federer, intending to offer a few words of encouragement. But before I could reach him, there was an agonised squeal of overstressed metal, and most of the outer wall of the docking bay simply fell away, remaining attached along the bottom lip, which bent and tore like an envelope Jurgen had taken it upon himself to open. While I continued to watch in open-mouthed astonishment, the far end of the makeshift ramp plunged into the frigid water surrounding us, raising a fountain of spray, and a wave which sent the whole vessel wallowing under our feet again.

‘That went about as well as could be expected,’ he said, with an unmistakable air of smugness.

‘You were only supposed to blow the frakking doors off!’ I said, astonishment and admiration at his resourcefulness mingling in my voice.

Federer shrugged. ‘That wouldn’t have helped us to get out any faster,’ he pointed out, reasonably enough. ‘At least this saves us a climb.’

‘If you want to swim for it,’ I rejoined, conscious that very few of the people on board could do that at all<sup>40</sup>, and that none of us would survive more than a handful of minutes if we were incautious enough to enter the freezing water in any case.

‘No need,’ Broklaw said, staring out at the panorama of bone-chilling desolation before us as though it was the most beautiful sight he’d seen in a very long time (which, to be fair, so far as he was concerned, it probably was). The far distant mountains were wreathed in cloud, fresh snow already falling to erase the scars of our passage, while closer at hand flurries of it were being driven by the wind to heap up in hummocks against the cracked and broken surface of the ice fields. ‘It’ll be firm enough to walk on before



long.'

Well, he'd know, I supposed, he was an iceworlder after all, so I edged a little closer to the gap, pulling my greatcoat more tightly around myself as I did so. There was still a little residual heat in the hull plating, but the wind was biting and rapidly dissipated the last traces of mist rising from the water surrounding us. I glanced down, noting with some surprise that a scum of ice was already beginning to form across the choppy surface, breaking up and reforming as the wavelets rippled beneath it, the open patches diminishing in size even as I stared in dumbstruck fascination.

It was then that I fancied I saw some flicker of motion in the murky waters, a dark shadow moving with sinuous purpose some distance beneath the surface. 'Did you see that?' I asked, and the major frowned.

'See what?' he replied, his eyes narrowing. We'd served together too long for him to dismiss anything I said out of hand, however outlandish it may have sounded to him, and of course I'd take anything he or Kasteen said equally seriously.

'I thought I saw something moving in the water,' I said, the palms of my hands tingling again, although given the freezing temperatures that could just have been impeded circulation. 'Like a big fish.'

Probably just a bit of debris breaking off below the waterline,' Broklaw said, not quite managing to suppress a smile. Obscurely cheered by his manifest scepticism, I found myself returning it, although if I'd had any inkling of what we were later to discover, you can be sure my reaction would have been very different.

'Probably was,' I agreed, in blissful ignorance, and turned away, attracted by the familiar odour of my aide, mingled with the rather more appetising scent of tanna.

'Thought you could do with this, sir,' he said, proffering a steaming flask. 'Warm you up a bit after getting so wet.'

'Thank you,' I said, warming my flesh and blood fingers around it gratefully. The bitter cold was insinuating itself through the weave of my greatcoat, even though we were still sheltered from the worst of the wind by the enclosing metal walls; remembering the way it would cut through to the bone almost as soon as I set foot on the icefields, I resolved to make the most of the hot beverage while I could. 'Much appreciated.' Although if the ship kept settling, we'd all be getting wet again before long, Broklaw's optimism notwithstanding.

‘You’re welcome, sir,’ my aide replied, staring past my left shoulder to get his first good look at the desolate snowscape beyond the gaping hole in the hull. The major’s casual prediction of a few moments before seemed to be coming true already, a pristine sheet of ice now stretching from our battered hull to the drifts and ice boulders in the distance, a steady crepitation tickling the ear with an audible counterpoint to the visible freeze. My spirits began to rise. If there was enough air still trapped to keep us buoyant a little while longer, the solidifying ice would begin to hold us up, trapping the half-sunken vessel where it was instead of sending us to the bottom. ‘How soon before we can get out there?’

‘Not long,’ I said, appreciating his impatience, which was no doubt shared by everyone aboard except me. As I narrowed my eyes against the chill wind, I thought I caught sight of a flicker of movement in the distance. ‘Have you got an amplivisor with you?’

He did, of course, producing one from his collection of utility pouches after a few seconds of rummaging. I raised it to my eyes, and swept the distant snowfields, registering nothing but the entirely natural flow of the light, powdery surface under the impetus of the wind.

‘Seeing things again?’ Broklaw jested, and I shrugged, lowering the amplivisor a little sheepishly.

‘Can’t be too careful,’ I began, just as my aide pointed into the middle distance, about ninety degrees from where I’d been looking.

‘Orks,’ he said, unslinging his precious melta with every sign of relish.

I spun round, lifting the amplivisor again, and nodded grimly in confirmation. ‘Trucks and warbikes,’ I said. ‘Closing fast.’ It was hard to be certain of their numbers, their progress churning up so great a quantity of snow around them that they seemed to be advancing in a blizzard of their own making, but it was certainly a considerably sized warband. Hardly surprising, given the spectacular nature of our arrival and the instinctive aggression of their kind; we must have accounted for a good many of their number in our cataclysmic progress through the mountains they’d infested, and the survivors would be incensed and vengeful enough to be out for blood even more than usual.

‘Get the ramp barricaded!’ Broklaw ordered, hurrying off to organise our defence, and a fresh chill ran down my spine, completely unconnected with the harsh wind screaming across the ice fields like the vanguard of the greenskin horde. Federer’s stroke of ingenuity had been intended to let us

disembark quickly and safely, but now it afforded the onrushing orks all but unimpeded access to the downed starship instead. There could be no question of getting everyone off now, and even if we did, anyone on foot on the smooth plain of hardening ice around us would be easy targets without a vestige of cover. The orks would fall on them like Fellonian raptors<sup>41</sup> on a herd of grox.

It seemed that, even on the ground, the *Fires of Faith* was still a deathtrap from which none of us could reasonably expect to escape alive.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## EIGHT

My pessimistic musings seemed not to be shared by my companions, however, which, given the circumstances, I suppose was probably just as well. If anything, the prospect of a stand-up fight with their ancestral enemies seemed to perk them up no end, affording a much-needed boost to their morale after the long and terrifying descent we'd so recently gone through. After being bounced around like so many tubers in a sack they were all eager to feel they were in control of their destinies again, and for a Valhallan there are few more enjoyable ways of working off a strop than killing a few orks. So, to that extent, the greenskins' appearance could hardly have been better timed.

Unfortunately there were considerably more than a few of them. As I continued to observe their approach, refining the focus of the amplivisor as best I could, given the clouds of snow crystals being thrown up all around them, and the even denser clouds of noxious vapours thrown out by their ill-tuned engines, it seemed to me that the greenskins still had us outnumbered. Add to that the position we were occupying, stuck in a vast metal box with an open side, things didn't look too good; huge as the rent Federer had blasted in the hull was, fewer than a quarter of our people would be able to bring a weapon to bear, the others left milling about behind them, unable to get a clear shot past the press of their comrades.

'What do you suggest?' Kasteen asked, having more than enough experience in the field to notice this problem for herself long before I got the chance to stick my oar in. 'Charge down the ramp so we can get a few

shots off before they run us down?’

I shook my head at the bleak jest, moving aside hastily as Captain Shambas, the commander of our Sentinel troop, clanked past us, a cargo container the size of a groundcar gripped casually in the handling claws of a power loader he’d managed to find. Emperor alone knew how he’d managed to get it running, considering it had been banging around the hold unsecured, but it would certainly make the business of getting some cover in place before the orks got close enough to start shooting a whole lot easier.

‘Wouldn’t work,’ I said, smiling wryly. There are commissars who’d think that was a brilliant idea, of course, and want to lead the charge themselves to boot (probably finding out a little late that they were further ahead of the rest than they’d bargained for, too), but I’ve never been that stupid, or unconcerned with casualties. Losses are inevitable on the battlefield, of course, but in my view, no one’s expendable apart from the enemy; angry, resentful troopers aren’t going to cover my back when the las-bolts start flying, and if they think I’ve got no qualms about putting them in harm’s way it won’t just be the enemy’s I have to worry about dodging. So I’ve always gone to a good deal of trouble to give the impression that I’m as concerned for their welfare as for my own. ‘Too much to trip over.’

Which was true, as it happened. The metal hadn’t sheered quite cleanly, and there were cracks and fissures in even the smoothest part which could trap a boot and twist an ankle; and that wasn’t taking the multitude of protruding structural beams and torn-off utility conduits into account either. Not a problem in an orderly and organised disembarkation, of course, but under fire, bordering on the suicidal.

‘What do you have in mind, then?’ Broklaw asked, raising his voice a little as Penlan’s squad doubled past, and began to set up a tripod-mounted autocannon in the lee of the crate Shambas had just dropped deftly to the deck.

‘Fortify in depth,’ I said. The faintly alarming shifts in my balance had almost ceased, so it seemed as though we were in little danger of sinking now, the gradually hardening ice beginning to support even the colossal weight of the downed starship. Reassured that we weren’t about to drown after all, my mind had turned once again to the warren of passages I had navigated to get here. I had little doubt that I could evade the greenskins with relative ease in an environment I knew so well how to take advantage

of, but bolting for them like a weasel for its burrow would hardly fit the image of resolute courage I generally took such pains to foster. On the other hand, if I made it sound like a carefully reasoned strategy... 'If we spread out through the passageways behind the docking bay, we can set up choke points and ambushes. Then if the greenskins get past the first line, we can pick them off piecemeal as they get split up.' It was a sound enough suggestion, I'd done it often enough downhive and in undercities, but I have to admit the notion of applying those lessons to the corridors of a derelict starship was something of a novel one.

Broklaw nodded thoughtfully. 'Might work, if we had time to organise it. But without a command unit to coordinate, we'd lose as many casualties to friendly fire as to the orks.'

'Good point,' I admitted, which it was; I'd only been thinking of going to ground in the warren of passageways myself. If we had properly functioning comms, and an auspex, and a pict screen to track the signals from everyone's comm-beads, not to mention a command Chimera to pack it all in, we'd have been able to turn the derelict craft into a highly efficient orkmeat factory. But under the circumstances, jamming several hundred stressed and jittery troopers into a confined space with instructions to shoot at the first hostile they came across would simply be doing the orks' job for them. I resigned myself to seeing this out in the bitter cold after all. 'Any other ideas?'

'Set up a crossfire,' Kasteen said, gesturing towards the tangle of galleries and catwalks clinging to the walls of the cathedral-high chamber<sup>42</sup>. 'Pack as many on the defensive line as we can, and space the others round the periphery, with overlapping fire lanes. Any orks get in, the reserves can pick them off from up there, while the rest of the line holds.' I could tell from her expression that she wasn't exactly happy at the prospect, but it was the best plan anyone had been able to come up with, so it would just have to do.

'Excellent,' I said, while Sulla's company scrambled to follow the colonel's order, and, despite my natural caution, moved up to the barricades for a better look. Which might strike you as uncharacteristically reckless, but at the moment the risk seemed minimal; the orks were too far away to hit us with their crude weapons (which didn't stop them firing them anyway, of course, just for the pleasure of making a loud noise), and it certainly wouldn't hurt morale, or my fraudulent reputation, to be seen up at

the sharp end. Besides, so far I'd only seen our position from some way back in the docking bay, and I have to confess to an almost childlike eagerness to view the outside of our much-abused vessel for myself. I'd seen the exteriors of starships from the viewports of shuttles on innumerable occasions, of course, but the prospect of being able to do so without an intervening expanse of vacuum seemed a fascinating novelty.

Accordingly, I slipped through one of the gaps which had yet to be plugged, and clambered awkwardly up the knee-high tangle of ripped and folded metal where the great metre-thick portal and the hull surrounding it had fallen away to the now solid sheet of ice a dozen metres below us. As I did so I gasped involuntarily, and shivered inside my heavy coat, the bone-clawing cold I remembered so well slicing through me like the malice of an eldar reiver<sup>43</sup>. Conscious of the number of eyes upon me, I drew my chainsword, determined to at least look the part, and make it perfectly plain that the only trembling the troopers could see was the result of the cold. (At least, if it wasn't, there was no harm in letting them think so.)

The view was certainly spectacular, although under the circumstances I didn't have much time to enjoy it. Unable to resist the temptation any longer, I glanced briefly back at the metallic escarpment behind me, lost for a moment in wonder that anything so huge had ever taken to the skies; even with the majority of it below the surface, it still seemed impossibly big, looming above me like a hab block or a manufactorum, seared and cindered by its passage through the atmosphere. Parts of it were rippled, where the metal had softened and flowed in the incredible heat, and, not for the first time, I found myself marvelling at the narrowness of our escape from certain death.

An escape which looked uncomfortably like being merely temporary. The rumbling of the approaching ork horde could be heard on the wind by now, and I turned to face them, an ominous sense of foreboding settling over me as if the darkening clouds above had descended to envelop my very soul.

'Looks like snow,' Jurgen observed, glancing in their direction as though that was the most pressing matter we had to deal with. He'd scrambled up the metallic slope downwind of me, so for once I didn't notice his approach until he spoke; then, not for the first time, his phlegmatic demeanour in the face of overwhelming odds heartened me, and I responded as casually as he had.

'Much of it?' I asked. A blizzard or two wouldn't disconcert the

Valhallans, might even work to our advantage, given their ability to operate effectively in extreme weather conditions, but it wouldn't do a lot for me, and anything which reduced visibility would undoubtedly help the orks just as much. They knew precisely where we were, and not being able to see what they were shooting at wasn't going to degrade their usual lamentable standard of marksmanship to any great degree anyway; but we needed to be able to pick off as many as we could before they closed.

Jurgen shook his head. 'Fair to middling,' he said, unhelpfully, and turned to face the onrushing horde, which by now was approaching the shores of the lake, and showing no signs of slowing down. 'Nice we've got enough to go round for once.'

'I suppose it is,' I said, trying to recall the last time I'd seen him perturbed by the odds facing us, and, as ever, failing. 'Best get back under cover.' Greenskins were hardly the most observant of creatures, and we might yet retain some element of surprise if they weren't expecting to find any survivors.

'Right you are, sir,' he agreed, trailing me back behind the barricade with visible reluctance, no doubt disappointed that he wasn't going to get the first shot in as he'd clearly been hoping.

'Everyone hold their fire,' I counselled<sup>44</sup>, taking up position behind the biggest and most solid-looking crate I could find, and drawing my laspistol. 'Let them get close enough to make every shot count.'

'We'll do that,' a familiar voice assured me, and I turned, to find a short, red-headed woman grinning at me with cheerful bloodlust. If she hadn't found her way into the ranks of the Guard, by means I felt it best not to enquire about, but which I was fairly certain had something to do with the magistratum of her home world, Magot's sociopathic tendencies would undoubtedly have found far less productive outlets; as it was, she'd tempered them into a useful tool, keeping them under control most of the time, and accepting the consequences of the occasional exception with unruffled good humour. We'd passed through a necron tomb together a few years ago, emerging from the experience reasonably intact and no less sane than before, and there were few troopers in the regiment I'd rather have with me when things looked really grim, so I returned the smile with a faint sense of relief.

'I'm sure you will, corporal,' I said.

Unfortunately the greenskins had other ideas. I'd been hoping our massed



firepower would disrupt their headlong rush across the ice, doing enough damage to the front ranks to bring the whole mob of them to a shuddering halt, or, more realistically, break them up into smaller groups as they worked their way around the obstructions created by the fallen, which we could pick off a little more easily. It was a tactic that had worked well enough on Perlia, and on most of the other occasions I'd been unlucky enough to find myself in the path of a rampaging orkish warband; but on this occasion the vanguard of their advance was heralded by a sudden clattering roar, as a handful of crude flying machines burst out of the murk surrounding the charging horde and swooped towards us, the downdraft from their whirring rotors flinging up whorls and eddies in the snow beneath them.

Ignoring the great mass of vehicles behind them, which were still beyond effective range in any case, though not for much longer travelling at that speed, we concentrated our fire on the airborne scouts, hoping to bring them down before they were able to report back anything of use.

'Keep firing!' Kasteen bellowed over the clattering roar of the greenskin gyros, which were jinking all over the sky, trying to avoid a sudden storm front of ground to air fire. Most of what we were able to bring to bear were only small arms, of course, which wouldn't discommode them much, the las-bolts plinking harmlessly from the metalwork of their fuselages, and the extraneous armour plate hung all over the airframes, apparently at random. Their one weak point was the open cockpit, which left the pilots exposed, no doubt to savour to the greatest possible extent the experience of travelling at speed so many of the creatures seem to crave; a fatal flaw, which soon saw a couple of them spiralling to destruction on the fringes of the icefield, the orks crewing them dead before they even hit the ground.

I flinched as one of the ramshackle flying machines thundered towards us, the crude bolter welded beneath it chattering vindictively as it chewed a line of craters in the ice beside the ramp, and to my surprise I heard Magot chuckling as she slowly traversed the lasgun in her hands. 'Always knew the greenies couldn't hit the broad side of a starship,' she said, 'but I never expected to see it for myself.'

'He's finding the range,' I cautioned, as the line of explosive-tipped bolts began moving up the ramp towards us, although I'm bound to admit that the amount of damage it did was negligible compared to what we'd already done to the vessel ourselves. It would be a different story in a second or

two, though, when the deadly rain began to find targets among the bodies of the troopers. I swung my arm, tracking the fast-moving target as best I could, but the chances of finding a weak spot or incapacitating the pilot with a relatively low-powered las-bolt from the handgun at this range were negligible.

‘He doesn’t have the head for it,’ Magot told me, squeezing the trigger, and reducing the pilot’s brains to a greasy mist, which the whirring rotors above him scattered in all directions. The suddenly pilotless gyro lurched wildly to the left, missing the open entrance to the docking bay by no more than a couple of metres, before crunching into the cliff face of metal, where it hung motionless for a moment before plummeting to the ice below, disintegrating as it fell.

‘Nice shot,’ I complimented her, and Magot nodded, before returning her attention to the advancing orkish ground force, which, displaying all the caution one might have expected from their kind, had just surged on to the ice without a second’s hesitation, charging towards us intent on bloody slaughter.

‘Take that frakker out!’ Penlan urged her heavy weapon team, as the last surviving aircraft wheeled around, and began to pull away. It was moving relatively sluggishly, and after a moment I realised why; in place of the guns the others had carried, the ominous, rounded bulk of a large bomb was nestled under its belly, painted with the features of a snarling squig.

‘Let him go,’ I said. ‘He’s no threat if he’s retreating. Concentrate on the trucks and buggies.’

‘Sir.’ She clearly wasn’t happy about it, but relayed the order to her team with alacrity nonetheless. ‘Retarget. Take out the ground vehicles.’

‘Sarge.’ The gunner acknowledged her with a nod, and depressed the barrel of his weapon a fraction. ‘Nads, it’s seized up again.’

‘Let me.’ Penlan gave the recalcitrant tripod a resounding whack with the butt of her lasgun. With a *crack!* of ionised air it discharged, and she flinched, glancing guiltily in my direction. ‘I thought I’d left the safety on.’

‘Good shot, sergeant,’ I said dryly. The stray las-round had taken the fleeing pilot clean in the back of the neck; as I watched, fascinated, the uncontrolled gyro dipped, wallowed, and plunged straight into the middle of the onrushing mob of orks. As I got my first good look at them, my mouth went dry; there were far more than even my most pessimistic imaginings, turning the ice black, roaring forward in their collections of

mobile scrap, or bailing out of them to charge us on foot, every last one of them intent on being the first to make it up the ramp and get stuck in hand to hand. We could never hold off so many, I thought.

Then a plume of smoke, pulverised ice and shredded ork rose into the air from the site of the gyro crash, and I distinctly saw the ice around the bottom of the ramp shift and flex. A moment later a thin dribble of water seeped out, freezing solid again almost instantly. Dropping my weapons for a moment I raised the amplivisor, which, by great good fortune, I hadn't got around to returning to Jurgen yet, and which still hung around my neck.

Something odd seemed to be happening at the site of the explosion, the greenskins milling around in disarray, breaking away from it in all directions. Only when one of the buggies lurched, and abruptly vanished, did I finally divine the cause. Before I could pass on my discovery, however, the onrushing horde finally found the range of their weapons, and the air around me became thick with bolter and stubber rounds.

'Heavy weapons, target the ice!' I voxed, before grabbing my laspistol and chainsword again, safe once more behind the sheltering crate. The lake we'd created might be freezing over, but it was still a huge volume of water: as yet, only a thin crust of ice had formed, just barely strong enough to support the weight of the orks and their vehicles. The bomb from the downed autogyro had been enough to rupture it; if we could only repeat the trick, on a larger scale, it might still be enough to save our necks.

'What I wouldn't give for some air support about now,' Broklaw grumbled, and I nodded in agreement; a Valkyrie or two would do the job in a single bombing run.

'Or some artillery,' I agreed, with a hopeful glance at the regimental vox operator, still hunkered down with her backpack transmitter, trying to raise the local command net. But we weren't going to get any fire support, that much was plain; surviving our fall from orbit had been miracle enough for one day.

We opened fire with a will, our lascannons, autocannons, and heavy bolters scything into the massed ranks of the enemy below us, but for every greenskin that fell another flowed in to take their place; we might just as well have been punching holes in water.

'This isn't working,' Broklaw said, and I was forced to agree. The gunners were doing their best to comply with the instructions I'd given them, but the sheer press of orkish bodies in the way was dissipating the energy of the

shots I'd hoped would begin to break up the ice. He tapped the comm-bead in his ear. 'Heavy weapons engage the vehicles, small arms the greenskins on foot.' He glanced at me, and shrugged. 'Maybe if we can cook off a few more ammo loads, that might do it.'

'Might do at that,' I agreed, more in hope than expectation, then my eye fell on Federer, popping off rounds from a grenade launcher with every sign of enthusiasm. Leaving Broklaw to coordinate the almost impossible task of stemming the tide of greenskins now lapping around the foot of our makeshift ramp, I hurried off to talk to its architect.

'Should be easy enough,' he assured me, once he'd grasped what I was after. 'Couple of satchel charges ought to do it. The thing is, they need to be below the surface for maximum effect.'

'And how do we do that, exactly?' I asked, with rather more asperity than I'd intended.

Federer shrugged. 'Haven't a clue,' he admitted cheerfully. 'But I can rig the charges for you at least.'

'Well, it's a start,' I conceded. There was an obvious answer to my own question, but it wasn't anything I wanted to do. Fighting our way down the ramp to the surface, hoping our comrades could provide enough covering fire to keep the orks from gunning us down on the way, wasn't exactly an appealing prospect.

Then I noticed the power loader, still idling where Shambas had parked it, and another option occurred to me; it was hardly any better than my first idea, but at least it offered a minuscule possibility of success.



## NINE

Though it only took a few moments to organise, every second was crucial, and I had good reason to fear that we'd be overrun before our preparations were complete. The heavy weapons on the orkish vehicles were pouring an incredible volume of fire into our refuge, and, despite the sturdiness of the defences we'd managed to erect, our casualties were mounting. Fortunately, there were still plenty of troopers in the rear ranks ready and willing to take their places on the line, and administer aid to the fallen, but our reserves weren't inexhaustible, and neither was our ammunition.

'Keep the ramp clear!' Broklaw commanded, and a fresh hailstorm of las-bolts swept it clean of the orkish vanguard, which, true to the instincts of the breed, seemed to have forgotten they had small arms of their own, and was simply intent on getting close enough to make use of the crude axes they were wielding. It was uncannily like watching the waves lapping against a beach, each surge of greenskins flowing a little further up the slope before falling back, gathering the strength to rush forward again.

'At least they seem to be concentrating on the foot of the ramp,' Shambas said, manoeuvring the power lifter as close to the edge of the drop as he dared. A few orkish rounds struck the heavy metal frame, and whined off into the distance, but he seemed unperturbed by the ricochets, no doubt used to that sort of thing in his usual mount.

'For the time being,' I agreed, peering down at the ice directly below us, which seemed mercifully free of ululating greenskins, and trying to ignore the spasm of dread which gripped me at the prospect of what I was about to

do. Despite the impression most people have of me, I've never been the kind of man who laughs in the face of danger, much preferring to snigger behind its back and make vulgar hand gestures while it isn't looking. Nevertheless, I'd come up with this ridiculous plan, and, as usual, everyone had simply assumed that meant I intended to carry it out myself. Disabusing them would have unfortunate consequences, to say the least, undermining my leadership and the confidence of the troopers at a point when our very survival meant keeping everyone focused and up to the mark; so, once again, my undeserved reputation for derring-do had backed me into a corner.

'Try to plant the charges close to the hull,' Federer said, with the calm assurance of an expert, secure in the knowledge that someone else was about to do the dirty work. 'The shockwaves'll bounce off it, intensifying the effect.'

'I'll bear that in mind,' I said, having no intention of straying any further from safety than I could help in any case. While the greenskins continued to jostle for a foothold on the ramp, the patch of ice in its lee would remain shadowed, escaping their notice altogether with a bit of luck. The rich odour of fermenting socks informed me that the other half of our forlorn hope<sup>45</sup> had arrived, and I turned to meet him, trying to project an air of quiet confidence for the benefit of everyone around us. 'Ready, Jorgen?'

'Right you are, sir,' my aide responded, from somewhere within the folds of his thick Valhallan greatcoat. With the flaps of his fur hat pulled down, and the collar pulled up, hardly any of his face was visible at all, which no doubt struck most of those present as a considerable improvement. There had been no question of his failing to accompany me; he simply took it for granted that his place on the battlefield was at my side, and that, short of a direct order to the contrary, where I went, so did he. An order I must confess it crossed my mind to give; but under the circumstances there was no one I'd rather have watching my back. Besides, if I left him behind, and by some miracle failed to get killed, I'd never hear the last of it; and an affronted Jorgen was never something to take lightly.

'We'll concentrate all our fire on the foot of the ramp while you're descending,' Broklaw said, and I nodded, grateful for the suggestion. Given the single-mindedness of the average ork intent on getting into melee, two men cautiously descending the face of the hull in the shadows it cast might well escape their notice altogether, but an additional diversion could hardly

hurt.

‘Good idea,’ I agreed, shrugging into the harness one of Federer’s people had rigged up, by the simple expedient of knotting some lasgun slings into loops and attaching them as securely as possible to the towing line bolted onto the chassis of the power loader. Normally it would be used to drag pallets across the holds, or to lift them into place after the improvised crane had scrambled into position on the narrow catwalks above them, but I would have laid a considerable sum of money that whoever had designed the thing had never envisaged the use I had in mind for it. I tugged at the tangle of webbing, experimentally, and to my relief it seemed solid enough. ‘Will it take the weight?’

‘And about five tonnes on top,’ Shambas assured me, assuming I meant the line rather than the fragile-seeming slings tied to them, and taking up the slack by winding the winch about a quarter of a turn. The improvised harness dug uncomfortably into my armpits, hoisting me onto my toes, a sensation I found remarkably unpleasant, not least because it brought me bumping into my identically accoutred aide, at an angle calculated to give me the full benefit of his unique aroma.

‘Then let’s get on with it,’ I said, aware that the bone-chilling cold outside would at least deaden my sense of smell. ‘Are the charges secure?’

‘They’re fine,’ Federer told me, slipping a pair of large, heavy satchels across my shoulders, one on each side ‘for balance,’ before kitting Jurgen out in a similar fashion. ‘Primed and ready.’

‘I’ll try not to drop them,’ I said, trying to ignore the vague sense of panic his words had stirred in me. ‘And if you could keep your finger off the firing button until we’re clear, I’d be very much obliged.’ Under the circumstances we’d elected to detonate the things by vox-relay, in case Jurgen and I were both gunned down or hacked to bits before we had a chance to activate any timers, although no one had been tactless enough to put it quite like that; which also accounted for the fact that, against all the usual safety procedures, the fuses had already been set.

‘I’ll listen out for your order,’ Federer assured me, tactfully failing to add ‘or death rattle,’ which seemed an equally probable cue for him to detonate from where I was standing; but there was nothing to be gained from thinking about that, so I teetered to the edge of the drop, and watched Jurgen swing himself outwards. Somewhat reassured by his failure to plummet to his death, I stepped over the brink myself, feeling the

improvised harness digging a little more deeply into my abused armpits.

‘Ground floor, please,’ I jested feebly, and Shambas grinned, prodding the winch carefully into life.

I’ve experienced my fair share of apprehension and dismay in the course of my career, Emperor alone knows, but the sensation of dangling helplessly at the end of a cable less than fifty metres from a warband of blood-maddened orks was among the most suspenseful<sup>46</sup> few moments of my life. If any one of them had looked up in our direction, we would have been dead in an instant, our corpses so riddled with bullets and bolter rounds we’d have arrived on the ice in bite-sized chunks. I held the butt of my laspistol tightly, scanning our surroundings as best I could for any sign of a threat; but the diversion Broklaw had promised us arrived on cue, a barrage of fire so intense that the ork host actually gave ground for a moment, which diverted their attention nicely. For an instant I even dared to hope that their will had been broken, but of course it wasn’t, the setback merely increasing their resolve to close with us and settle accounts hand to hand. With a collective bellow of WAAAAAAGHHHH! they surged forward again, reaching the highest point yet on the bitterly contested ramp, before being beaten back to its foot once more.

With all that noise, the relatively faint chugging and squeaking of the winch went unheard, and before long I felt my boots crunch against the ice. It was rougher than I’d expected, frozen ripples and a light dusting of powdery crystals giving my bootsoles enough of a grip to be able to walk without slipping if I placed my feet cautiously enough; which, under the circumstances, was pretty much a given.

I shrugged the harness off with a great sense of relief; the wind had made us oscillate gently as we descended, and this, together with being so close to Jurgen, had left my stomach feeling a little unsettled. ‘Be ready to pull us back up,’ I instructed, not wanting to leave anything to chance, and the pair of us slunk gratefully into the shadows cast by the looming metal wall.

From the ground, the half-buried starship looked bigger than ever, an impression strengthened as we scuttled into the lee of its overhang. If there was one thing an old hive hand like me was good at it was lurking in shadows, and I must confess that my confidence rose a little as we gained the refuge they offered; my black greatcoat would blend in with the relative darkness very nicely, and Jurgen’s dark grey one<sup>47</sup> would do the same. A quick glance in the direction of the orks was enough to reassure me that



they were still happily occupied with being decimated, and I swung the first of the demo packs off my shoulder. 'Best get to it,' I said.

In the event, it was surprisingly easy to place the bulky charges; a quick blast from Jurgen's melta was enough to provide a hole suitable for our needs, and all I had to do was drop the satchel inside, with a quick glance to confirm that the standby rune was still glowing on the detonator. We worked our way along the hull, pausing at intervals of about fifty metres as Federer had directed, so that by the time we came to place the final charge we were close to the point where the lowering metal cliff began to curve away, affording us a little more cover from the bulk of the orkish army than we'd previously been able to enjoy.

Perhaps that made us careless, attracting the attention of a scouting party, or perhaps we were simply unlucky enough to be in the path of a late-arriving group eager to join the fray<sup>48</sup>, but just as I was on the point of placing the final charge the bellowing of a badly-tuned engine assaulted my ears, followed almost at once by the rattle of a heavy-calibre weapon. Fortunately the gunner was no better a shot than the majority of his kind, the surface of the ice exploding into sharp-edged splinters three or four metres from where I was standing. I dropped reflexively into a crouch, fumbling the bag full of explosives down the hole, where it was less likely to be detonated by a lucky round, reducing Jurgen and I to an unpleasant stain in the process, and brought my laspistol up, searching for a target.

Unfortunately, there were several in sight, bearing down on us with frightening speed, led by one of the curious tracked cycle hybrids I'd seen so often on Perlia. The unmistakable cylindrical turret of a crude flamethrower filled the rear cargo compartment, and a trailered fuel tank bounced precariously in its wake, a couple of gretchin riggers clinging to the flexible fuel pipe between the two with the unbreakable grip of pure terror. Behind it, a couple of buggies rattled and bounced, the bellowing gunners clinging to their pintle mounts the source of the incoming fire which had first alerted us to their presence.

I cracked off a few shots, not really expecting much of a result at this range, and the ragtag convoy continued to bear down on us, as indifferently as if I'd done no more than sneeze in their general direction. Jurgen had better luck, however, simply raising the melta in his hands and squeezing off a shot at the closest target.

By great good fortune this happened to be the self-propelled flamethrower,

which detonated spectacularly from the sudden thermal shock, its payload igniting with a roar and a blast of heat I'd probably have been grateful for if I hadn't lost all feeling in my extremities by this time. As it was, I felt the shockwave against my cold-numbed face, and flinched instinctively as pieces of scrap and barbecued greenskin clattered to the ice around me. 'Run!' I yelled, suiting the action to the word, and taking to my heels as a blazing slick of combusting promethium spread across the ice between us and the orks, flowing in our direction with unnerving rapidity.

'Commissar. Is something wrong?' Kasteen's voice rang in my comm-bead, as I realised we were now cut off from the winch we'd been counting on to haul us back to safety.

'Orks,' I snapped briefly, as I glanced back over my shoulder. 'What else?'

I was just in time to see the blazing slick envelop one of the buggies, which had failed to turn in time, the driver evidently caught by surprise at the lack of traction his tyres had on the smooth ice of the newly formed lake; he still had the clumsy steering yoke hard over, as, waltzing elegantly in a slow circle, the buggy slid gently into the heart of the inferno. The gunner just had time for a final defiant burst in our direction before the flames swallowed them, and their fuel and ammunition began to cook off in a small series of secondary explosions.

Of course a sideshow like that was bound to attract attention, and although the majority of the greenskins besieging the ramp continued trying to climb it with single-minded belligerence, all too many of those on the periphery of the pushing and shouting mob began turning their heads in our direction, pointing and gesticulating angrily. Though I couldn't hear a word of the ensuing conversation, I had little need to; before long, a score or more of the hulking figures broke away from the main group, and began racing towards us across the ice with deceptive speed. I'd fought orks too often before to be fooled by their ungainly appearance; lumbering they may well have been, but they could move fast when they had to, and I had little doubt that they would run us down quickly if we let them get close enough.

Worse, a few of the vehicles accompanying them seemed to be losing interest in pouring suppressive fire into the exposed docking bay, wheeling about to follow the breakaway faction.

Then the roar of a powerful engine reminded me that we still had an even more pressing matter to deal with, as the second buggy emerged from the plume of greasy smoke drifting from the site of the flamethrower's

immolation. The driver of this one seemed a little more cautious, or had learned the lesson of his compatriot's demise, and advanced at little more than walking pace, hunched over the controls of his lurching, slithering vehicle in an attitude of intense concentration<sup>49</sup>. The gunner grinned down at us, exposing far too many teeth and tusks, and pulled the trigger of his autocannon, swinging the stream of lethal projectiles towards us with lazy deliberation.

There was only one way to go, and I took it, charging the idling vehicle head-on, wrongfooting the greenskins nicely: the gunner tried to depress the barrel of his weapon to follow me, responding to the discovery that I was now inside its range with a bellow of rage and disappointment. 'Take out the driver!' I shouted to Jurgen, confident that he would be dogging my heels as always, and cracked off a fusillade of laspistol rounds at the standing gunner. Several of the las-bolts hit the mark, but instead of putting him down, they simply maddened the brute; I just had time to draw my trusty chainsword before he launched himself at me, roaring like an angry cudbear. Forewarned, I pivoted, evading a blow from fists which could shatter rockcrete, and cut at him as he hurtled past. The whirling blades bit deep, eliciting another howl of anger, before he was on me again in a frenzy of blows, any one of which would have killed me if it connected. Fortunately none did, and by the time I finished parrying them, his hands and forearms were seamed with ichor-oozing wounds.

Cursing the greenskins' preternatural resilience, I drove in again, taking one arm off just above the elbow, and thrust deep into his chest. It was a killing blow, which would have accounted for a human in an instant, but the ork merely staggered, driving the spinning adamantium teeth deeper into his own body as he tried to reach me with his remaining hand by forcing his way up the blade. I sliced the sword free, severing his spinal column, and the greenskin collapsed, abruptly losing control of everything below the waist.

A bright flash and the stench of charring meat informed me that Jurgen had taken my order as literally as he usually did, and I turned in time to see the driver's headless body toppling from his seat. The buggy continued to roll forward, its engine grumbling, and as I turned to watch its progress, I caught sight once again of the breakaway mob bearing down on us. It was too close for us to attempt to return to the *Fires of Faith*, even if it were possible to find a way round the pool of burning promethium, the

newcomers angling to cut us off from the downed ship and whatever refuge we might find there.

‘There’s a lot of ’em,’ Jurgen said, raising his melta with the air of a man determined to do his best, despite being faced with a task he strongly suspects to be beyond his ability to complete.

I nodded, my mouth dry. If we tried to fight, we’d be cut down in seconds by the sheer weight of numbers, and there was no cover to be seen anywhere on the wind-blasted ice sheet. Then my eye fell again on the slowly-moving vehicle.

‘Jurgen,’ I said, ‘can you still drive one of those?’ He’d had plenty of practice with the buggy we’d captured on Perlia, and although no two greenskin vehicles are ever exactly the same, they looked similar enough.

Divining my purpose, he lowered his weapon at once, and began sprinting towards the errant vehicle; it was almost impossible to make out his expression, given the small amount of his face I was able to see, but I was fairly sure it was more cheerful than it had been a moment before. ‘Been a while,’ he called back over his shoulder, ‘but I don’t suppose I’ve lost the knack.’

I was about to follow, when something clamped itself painfully and immobilisingly around my ankle, and I looked down to see my erstwhile opponent glaring up at me with hate-filled eyes, his sole remaining hand clasp my boot, and his fang-filled mouth agape, ready to bite. In no mood to prolong our duel, I slashed down with my chainsword, severing his other arm, and kicked my way free of the suddenly relaxing fingers. I kept going, clambering into the passenger compartment of the abandoned buggy, and grabbed the pintle mount.

‘Well?’ I asked, and by way of reply my aide gunned the engine, handling the crude controls with every sign of confidence. Remembering the lessons I’d learned on Perlia, I clung as tightly as I could to the solid metal post, just as he smacked the accelerator open to its fullest extreme. The crude vehicle lurched forward, violently enough to loosen the fillings in my teeth, and I almost lost my footing despite my grip; as I’d expected, refinements like springing and shock absorbers had been unknown to the builder of the thing<sup>50</sup>. Nevertheless, despite the discomfort, we were moving away from the pursuing orks, at a rate sufficient to outstrip the ones on foot at least.

Stubber and bolter rounds began to chew up the ice around us, and occasionally pock the thick metal of the bodywork, but I could live with

that: having more sense than to try using the crude heavy weapon the buggy was equipped with, which would be all but impossible to hold on aim unaided, and could well break my shoulder with the recoil, I hunkered low, and popped off a few rounds with my laspistol, although under the circumstances I had no great expectation of actually hitting anything.

‘What’s happening?’ Broklaw voxed. ‘Some of the greenskins are moving off.’

‘They’re after us,’ I told him, ‘but we’ve commandeered one of their buggies, so we can keep ahead of them. I hope. Federer, detonate...’ I’d been intending to add ‘as soon as we’re clear,’ but the sapper captain must have had his thumb poised over the firing button, because no sooner had the words left my mouth than a quartet of fountains erupted right where we’d buried the charges. A low rumble followed, audible even over the racket of our untuned engine, and a filament of cracks began to radiate out across the ice.

‘It’s working!’ Broklaw told me, unnecessarily, a note of concern belatedly entering his voice. ‘Get off the ice!’

‘That’s the idea,’ I said, fumbling the amplivisor back up, and trying to make sense of the bouncing image it relayed to me. The ice was breaking up all around the crippled starship, just as I’d hoped, fragmenting into floes and bergs which began to collide with one another, rising and falling on the swell created by the backwash of the explosions.

It took a moment or two for the majority of the orks to realise what was happening, and by the time they did it was far too late. Those on foot redoubled their efforts to gain a foothold on the ramp, turning on one another in their desperation, but much good it did them; most were engulfed by the freezing water in a matter of seconds, the tiny islands of ice they found themselves on tilting and sliding in the turbulence, responding to the frantic movement of those atop them. Many a greenskin plunged into the depths with his hands or jaws locked round the throat of another, while those that managed to gain the solid footing of the ramp were swiftly dispatched by the disciplined fire of the Valhallans, which had never faltered, however desperate the situation.

The vehicles fared no better than those on foot: by the time the drivers realised what was going on, and attempted to flee, the ice was already breaking up under them. Those nearest the site of the explosion sank almost at once, while those furthest away, and with most time to react, were

quickly caught and overtaken by the widening network of cracks, which seemed to be spreading with blinding speed.

‘How long until we hit the shoreline?’ I asked, reluctant to disturb Jurgen’s concentration at a time like this, but desperate to know if we were going to make it.

‘Almost there,’ he assured me, his voice a little attenuated by the comm-beads; I could almost have tapped him on the shoulder from where I was crouched, if I’d been willing to take my life in my hands and try moving about in the bouncing, rattling contraption we rode, but the noise from its engine drowned out any attempt at normal conversation. Then he added ‘Seems I was right.’

It was only as the first few flakes of snow drifted into my face, accelerated to stinging velocity by our breakneck progress, that I recalled our earlier conversation about the looming clouds. With an abruptness which took me completely by surprise, the air became filled with whirling white flakes, which began to obscure my view of the debacle behind me. Giving up on the amplivisor, I narrowed my eyes, trying to make out what was going on as best I could unaided. The knot of orks which had broken away from the main mob to come after us was well behind, running in our wake with undiminished vigour, although whether to continue trying to engage us or to save their own skins it was impossible to tell<sup>51</sup>. At any event, it was academic now, the rapidly-expanding network of cracks easily outpacing their running feet.

Then, abruptly, they were gone; the ice lifting for a moment, as though some huge aquatic beast was surfacing beneath it, before subsiding again, to leave nothing but a pool of open water, which swiftly began to scab over with a fresh froth of ice.

‘What the hell was that?’ I asked involuntarily, wondering if I’d imagined the whole thing, but there was no time to consider the matter further, as a fresh rain of stubber rounds clattered against the armour plate protecting me. I turned my head, squinting through the thickening blizzard, to see a truck loaded with roaring greenskins coming up fast on our right hand side. It was flanked by a couple of half-tracks, with a buggy bringing up the rear; a moment later this too upended abruptly, disappearing in its turn through the disintegrating ice.

‘More orks,’ Jurgen informed me, apparently under the impression that the sudden burst of incoming fire had prompted my rhetorical question. How he

managed to stay ahead of the spreading pattern of cracks I'll never know; he was an iceworlder, of course, with an innate affinity for environments like this, and no doubt was able to steer us wherever the ice was strongest, instead of making a headlong rush in a straight line and hoping for the best, as most of the greenskins seemed to be doing with a conspicuous lack of success, but that would have been no mean feat under ideal conditions. Aboard a ramshackle, barely controllable ork machine, with thick snow obscuring his surroundings, it was little short of a miracle.

I returned fire again, with the same lack of success as before, achieving nothing beyond provoking another storm of inaccurate rounds from the orkish gunners. With a thrill of horror I noticed that the ice between us was breaking up now, which at least had the positive effect of forcing our paths to diverge.

'Hang on, sir!' Jurgen called, as if any other course of action was remotely feasible, and to my inexpressible relief I felt the first of a series of bone-jarring jolts, which my previous experience of riding in vehicles like this told me could only be the result of us finally travelling over solid ground. I tried to keep our greenskin escort in sight, but the blizzard was descending in earnest now, and a series of jagged ice ridges and snowdrifts intervened, so within seconds they'd vanished completely.

Jurgen cut the engine and we rolled to a halt, my spine finally beginning to unkink itself. My ears were still ringing from the deafening racket, so it took a moment for me to begin to distinguish ambient sounds; when I could, I frowned, in some perplexity. The faint rattle of orkish firearms was drifting towards us on the wind.

'Sounds like they're arguing about whose fault it was they lost us,' Jurgen said, an unmistakable tone of satisfaction in his voice. If there's one thing a Valhallan relishes almost as much as killing greenskins, it's the notion of greenskins killing one another.

'Maybe,' I said. My palms were too numb to tingle, but I was pretty certain that they should have been. Even orks would have taken a little longer than that to find something to squabble about after seeing an entire warband annihilated in front of their eyes. 'But perhaps we should check it out.'

All my instincts were urging me to find somewhere comfortably warm to hole up in until the ice froze hard enough to rejoin our companions, but the prospect of being ambushed by belligerent greenskins was hardly an

inducement to relax; I'd long ago learned that knowing precisely where your enemies are is the only way to be sure of avoiding them, and that meant scouting our immediate surroundings as quickly as possible.

We took a few moments to secure the buggy, in case we needed it again, routines which had become second nature nearly two decades ago on Perlia coming back to me as though it had only been yesterday. I even felt a pang of nostalgia for the scorching desert we'd battled through in the early stages of our long and terrifying journey to safety, but a faceful of snow flung by a sudden gust of wind brought me back rapidly to the present, and we set out in the direction of the gunfire without further ado. The intense cold was beginning to make itself felt in earnest now, and it was all I could do to keep my frozen limbs moving through the knee-high drifts and the almost solid wall of wind-driven flakes which battered away at us.

If it hadn't been for Jurgen I'd have been irretrievably lost almost as soon as I'd set out, but his sense of direction in this desolate terrain seemed as reliable as my own inside a tunnel system, so I plodded in his wake, marvelling at his sure-footedness. He placed his feet carefully, maintaining his balance apparently without effort on the treacherous surface, and I felt certain that had he not felt obliged to keep pace with my own floundering progress, he would have been halfway to the horizon by now. Though visibility was remarkably poor we could still hear sporadic outbreaks of gunfire, and proceeded with all due caution in their general direction, having no desire to walk into an ambush, or the middle of whatever internecine squabble the orks had found to amuse themselves with.

'Good news,' Kasteen voxed me, as I slogged through a particularly deep patch, which Jurgen had negotiated with far less effort. 'We've managed to get through to one of the militia patrols in the area. They're inbound to assist, and they're relaying our vox messages.'

'Good,' I said, stumbling in something which could have been a rodent burrow, and adding something profane under my breath.

The vox circuit must still have been open, because I was answered by an unmistakably feminine chuckle. 'Any luck with the ork hunt?'

'We can still hear gunfire,' I said, not entirely accurately, as the shooting had ceased while we'd been talking, 'and Jurgen's pretty sure he can locate where it's coming from.'

'Don't take too many chances,' she cautioned. 'You must have used up



most of your luck ration by now.’ Which was certainly true, and had been for a long time by that point: but despite the odds, here I still am, decades later. I had no idea of that at the time, of course, so I simply shrugged.

‘You can count on that,’ I agreed, wiping a thin veil of melted slush from my eyebrows, and trying to focus on Jurgen in the distance. He was climbing easily up a jagged outcrop of ice, as though it were no more slippery than a grassy knoll, and I sighed inwardly at the prospect of having to follow him. He’d take an easier route if I told him too, of course, but he knew this landscape far better than I ever would, and if he felt that was the way to avoid contact with the orks, it was fine by me. At which point I turned, attracted by a flicker of movement in the corner of my eye, but when I looked at it directly, all I could see was a whorl of wind-driven snow.

In retrospect, of course, the thought of how close I was to death at that point is a horrifying one, but by luck or the Emperor’s grace I must have been hidden equally effectively by the blizzard, and was to remain in blissful ignorance for a little while longer.

‘I can see something,’ Jurgen said, his voice in my comm-bead hushed and urgent. ‘Looks like they’ve abandoned the vehicles.’

Thanking the Emperor for the thin crust of snow now clinging to my greatcoat, the most effective possible camouflage in this desolate landscape, I scrambled and slithered my way up to join him, expecting some hulking greenskin to come bellowing out of the murk brandishing a combat blade at any moment. But none did, and I hunkered down next to Jurgen, fumbling the amplivisor into place once more.

Fortunately my augmetic fingers were immune to the numbing effects of the cold, enabling me to hold the device in place without blurring the image by shaking too much, and I studied the vista below with some bafflement. My aide had been right, the truck and the two half-tracks had clearly been abandoned, something I knew their drivers would never contemplate under normal circumstances. I studied them carefully, taking particular note of any pitting which marred the armour plate, but all the marks of combat damage I could see were old, a patina of rust masking the telltale brightness of fresh hits.

‘If they were shooting at each other, they’d left the vehicles first,’ I concluded, which made no sense at all, even for orks, which were hardly the most rational of creatures to begin with.

After a few more minutes of watching nothing happen, and losing the last vestiges of feeling in my feet while we did so, I decided we might as well make a closer examination of the abandoned transports. There was no obvious sign of damage on any of them, or at least no more than you'd expect, although we did find traces of orkish blood in a few places.

'That's odd,' Jurgen remarked, looking at a pool of disquietingly dark ice in one corner of the truck's passenger compartment. 'If one of 'em got shot here, you'd expect to find near misses all over the tailgate.'

I nodded, equally familiar with the vagaries of greenskin marksmanship. 'Must have been taken out hand to hand,' I concluded.

'That's what I thought,' Jurgen said. 'But if he was the one doing the shooting...'

I nodded again, my jaw cramping painfully from the effort of preventing my teeth from chattering. Orks are resilient, as I knew only too well from personal experience, but very few of them can stand up to a burst of heavy-calibre fire at point-blank range. It was hard to envisage an assailant getting close enough to get stuck in; or, for that matter, the ork being charged not to just drop his weapon to meet the challenge head-on.

'It wasn't just him,' I reminded my aide. 'It sounded like most of them. At least to begin with.'

'I suppose they'd have whittled each other down quickly enough,' Jurgen mused, and I glanced around us, at the shifting white blanket of wind-driven snow flowing across the relatively open space. It was beginning to drift against the abandoned vehicles, but as yet had got no higher than the rims of the tyres.

'If they'd done that, the ground would be littered with corpses,' I pointed out. The drifting snow would bury any cadavers in the area quickly enough, but there had hardly been sufficient time to cover a dozen or more without the slightest trace in the handful of minutes it had taken Jurgen and I to get here (even though it had felt a great deal longer to me, you can be sure). And even if it had, I knew Jurgen's feeling for snow was reliable enough for him to have noticed the telltale signs of their presence beneath the surface. 'Can you see any tracks?'

'I'm afraid not, sir,' he told me, shaking his head regretfully. 'Wind's too strong. They'd have been gone in no time.' To emphasise the point, he gestured back the way we'd come, the bootprints we'd made on the way here already erased by the scudding snow.

After a few more moments of desultory, and increasingly uncomfortable, poking about failed to uncover any further traces of the greenskins, or clues to their fate, we began our return to the dubious refuge of the *Fires of Faith*, spurred on, at least in my case, by the thought of fresh tanna in the largest mug imaginable. No doubt if that particular image hadn't been so insistently uppermost in my mind as we trudged across the rapidly refreezing lake, I would have been brooding on the mystery with a considerable sense of disquiet; but as it was, I barely gave the matter another thought until it was far too late.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



*Editorial Note:*

*Since, at this point, Cain's narrative makes one of the chronological jumps characteristic of his account of events when he deems little of interest to have occurred in the interim, this seems as good a point as any to insert the following extract, which may make some of what follows a little clearer.*

From *Interesting Places and Tedious People: A Wanderer's Waybook*, by Jerval Sekara, 145.M39.

Nusquam Fundumentibus is well named, being both some distance from the main warp routes, and as desolate as iceworlds generally tend to be. Nevertheless, it has a good deal to recommend it for those discriminating wayfarers prepared to look beyond its most obvious characteristics.

For one thing, it has a surprisingly high population for such a superficially unattractive world, who, for the most part, are to be found in the dozen or so cavern cities scattered around the globe. The largest, and by far the most comfortable, of these is Primadelving. The planetary capital boasts theatres, opera houses and duelling pits equal, both in the opulence of their decoration and the quality of the diversions they offer, to those of many a better favoured world. Its parks and gardens are plentiful, some occupying entire galleries of the vast underground complex, each devoted to the flora, and in a few cases fauna, of a different neighbouring star system.

Despite their troglodytic existence, the citizens of Primadelving enjoy a good deal of light, warmth and space. The first of these is provided by a

complex arrangement of shafts and mirrors, through which the ambient light of the sun is directed to every corner of their subterranean habitat, preserving the diurnal round; when night falls on the surface, luminators and waylights are kindled, just as they would be in any open air metropolis, enabling life to continue in a properly civilised fashion. Though the average Nusquan prefers a degree of chill in the air, as one would expect, they are cosmopolitan enough not to assume similar tastes in their off-world visitors, and every establishment catering to them contains heaters which can be adjusted to levels bordering on the tropical, if so desired. It's advisable not to increase the temperature to quite this extent, however, if patronising a hotel on one of the upper levels of the city, as it may well be hollowed out of the ice itself, rather than the bedrock beneath it, with consequences which can be all too readily imagined.

Such apparent profligacy with the energy reserves such harsh worlds normally husband more carefully is less foolhardy than it might seem, since Primadelving, and the string of smaller towns and outhabs which surround it in the province known as the Leeward Barrens, are literally sitting on an inexhaustible supply. An asteroidal impact long before humanity first set foot on the world fractured the planetary crust, creating a ring of fissures, through which magma continues to seep not far below the surface, and into which the Adeptus Mechanicus has been able to tap by great ingenuity and the blessing of the Omnissiah. The towns and cities of the lesser provinces, being less well favoured, are forced to rely on fusion generators and fossil fuel furnaces instead, which, though effective enough, leave them less attractive to the discriminating wanderer; although the far-famed Ice Cathedral of Frigea is worth taking a shuttle flight to visit, if only to see one of the few permanent surface features erected by the Nusquans.



## TEN

After all the excitement of our arrival, it was almost a relief to get stuck into the war, which we did with alacrity. Or, to be more accurate, the regiment did: I found it far more congenial to hang around in the relative warmth and comfort of Primadelving, while the Valhallans made the most of what they seemed to regard as the next best thing to a holiday resort<sup>52</sup>.

Despite the damage our precipitous arrival had done to the orkish warbands lurking in the Spinal Range, there were still more than enough of them infesting the Barrens to keep everyone happy, and the 597th spent the first couple of months happily reducing their numbers even further. If anything, we seemed to be running out of greenskins to kill remarkably quickly, which should have been good news all round; but instead I was left feeling pensive and uneasy.

‘The number of raids on outlying settlements and installations has dropped by nearly fifty per cent in the nine weeks since our arrival,’ I said, projecting a series of graphs and graphics on the ornately gilded hololith which dominated the middle of the operations room. Strictly speaking, I needn’t have bothered with such an elaborate presentation, and if I’d only been discussing the matter with Kasteen and Broklaw I wouldn’t have done, but we’d been either blessed or cursed (I had yet to make my mind up either way) with a planetary governor who took a lively interest in the progress of the campaign, and who insisted on remaining fully informed. Kasteen seemed to have hit it off with her at once, which meant that Her Excellency Milady Clothilde Striebgriebeling had an unnerving tendency to wander into

strategy meetings with little or no warning, and it would have been discourteous to present things in a manner she'd find difficult to follow. Besides, I'd never been averse to a bit of makework which would keep me away from the fighting, and the bitter cold up on the surface.

'Then you're clearly doing an excellent job,' Clothilde<sup>53</sup> congratulated us, with a particularly warm smile at Kasteen. Blonde and high cheekboned, she carried herself with confidence, but lacked the hauteur which so often went with it, and which generally made the aristocracy such tedious company. She looked as though she was in her early forties, which probably meant she was at least double that, if not heading into her second century, given the fondness of the nobility for the occasional juvenat treatment; but if that were so, at least she'd had the common sense not to arrest her age at a ridiculously low one out of misguided vanity, electing instead to reflect the maturity she'd acquired along with her responsibilities. Her gown was simple, pale grey and white, offset with a minimum of carefully selected jewellery, an understated simplicity which somehow made her the focus of the room, however many other people were crowding it.

Which in this case were rather too many, in my opinion. In addition to Her Excellency, and Kasteen and Broklaw, there was the colonel in command of the nascent Nusquan 1st, now up to four companies, her second-in-command, and a scattering of senior people from the local forces, who looked at them both with a mixture of respect and resentment, no doubt wishing they were still junior enough to have some chance of selection for the two companies which were still in the process of formation. Clothilde, of course, was surrounded by a coterie of advisors and hangers-on, who all seemed erroneously convinced that their opinions were of interest to someone other than themselves, and would therefore express them at every conceivable opportunity. The local Arbitrator's office<sup>54</sup> had sent a representative, the only man in the room apart from Broklaw and myself, who made no secret of his complete lack of interest in the entire proceeding; but at least we'd been spared the presence of anyone from the Ecclesiarchy or the Adeptus Mechanicus, whose members tended to a prolixity which would have slowed proceedings to a crawl.

And then there was the commissar attached to the Nusquan 1st, fresh out of the schola progenium if I was any judge, and a damn sight too eager by half for my peace of mind. She leaned forward now, thin-lipped, her dark eyes narrow with disapproval.

‘The regiment from this world has performed extremely well too,’ she reminded the governor prissily, ‘not to mention the militia.’ She turned an appraising eye in the direction of Kasteen, Broklaw and myself. ‘Though I’m sure we’re all grateful for the assistance of these new arrivals, perhaps we should also remember the sacrifices your own citizens have made.’ The Nusquan officers present puffed themselves up appreciatively, exchanging smug little half-nods with one another.

‘Sacrifices which, in many cases, were completely unnecessary,’ Kasteen responded tartly, provoking a raised eyebrow from the tyro commissar, who was clearly unused to the idea of troopers who talked back.

‘Would you care to explain that remark?’ the young woman asked coldly, in a manner she no doubt intended to sound intimidating. Knowing Kasteen rather better than she did, I settled back in my excessively padded chair, my concerns about the anomalous intelligence reports put to one side for the moment, in favour of the entertainment to come.

‘I wouldn’t have thought I’d have to,’ Kasteen snapped back. ‘Just because the greenskins make head-on attacks at every opportunity, that doesn’t mean we should respond in the same way. Your casualty figures are three times ours, and the locals’ are even worse.’

‘Only cowards avoid combat,’ the young woman said, ‘and they have no place in the Imperial Guard.’

I saw Kasteen’s hand twitch towards her sidearm, and stepped in quickly before matters got too out of hand. I knew she had more sense than to draw the weapon, let alone use it, but the insult was a grievous one, and her self-control far from infinite. The governor had been kind enough to make one of the ballrooms of her palace available to us as a command centre, and I was certain that whatever alternative arrangements we’d be able to make if we wore out our welcome by an unseemly display of bad temper, particularly if it left bloodstains on the polished wooden floor, would be far less comfortable. So why take chances?

‘Commissar Forres,’ I said evenly, ‘I suggest you withdraw that remark. I’ve served with Colonel Kasteen for the last ten years, and found her courage and devotion to duty beyond question.’ Kasteen and Broklaw exchanged a look which I can only describe as quietly smug.

‘Then perhaps your standards are lower than my own,’ Forres shot back, her hackles visibly rising.

‘I’m sure they are,’ I replied, wrongfooting her nicely with an indulgent



smile. 'But mine have been tempered with a little more experience of the real galaxy. You may also note that the number of confirmed kills by the 597th is a little more than double that recorded by your own regiment, and three times that of the militia, which would hardly have been the case if they had indeed been avoiding contact with the enemy.'

'It's called using tactics,' Kasteen added. 'You might find it worth a try.'

Forres tightened her jaw, glaring at her with open dislike. 'I can see your standards have been tempered a great deal,' she told me, in what she no doubt fondly imagined was a withering tone. 'Rather more than I would have expected from a man of your reputation.'

Jurgen's remarkable odour materialised at my shoulder, the collection of data-slates he'd been minding for me cascading to the floor as he leaned in to speak quietly to me. 'If you'll be requiring a second, again, sir,' he said, in a confidential undertone which carried to every corner of the table, 'I'll get on with the arrangements.'

'What's he talking about?' Clothilde asked, with a faint frown of bafflement.

'The last time a commissar from another regiment accused Colonel Kasteen of being unfit for command,' Broklaw told her, clearly speaking more for Forres's benefit than for the governor's, 'Commissar Cain called him out.'

'You fought a duel for your lady's honour?' The governor looked at me in manifest surprise, and then at Kasteen with a hint of a conspiratorial smile. 'How very gallant.'

'Colonel Kasteen and I are merely comrades in arms,' I assured her hastily, not wanting to give the wrong impression, and all too aware of how rapidly gossip can spread. 'Any more personal relationship between us would be highly improper. The challenge was merely a matter of principle.' And because Tomas Beijs was an infuriating little Emperor-botherer who'd been trying to get me shot for cowardice at the time, and I'd finally run out of patience with him.

'I'm sure it was,' the governor said insincerely, inclining her head in Kasteen's direction. 'And I'll look forward to hearing all about it the next time Regina is free to take tea.'

Forres looked at me, then at the worn and battered chainsword at my waist, no doubt contrasting it with the almost forge-fresh condition of her own. 'I withdraw the remark,' she said tightly. 'We're here to kill greenskins, not

one another.’ Which was the first sensible thing I’d heard her say since we’d sat down.

I leaned back lazily in my chair, sure that an appearance of complete unconcern would be the most likely way to get under her skin, and damned if I was going to let such a callow whelp get the last word in. ‘Good,’ I said. ‘But I had no intention of killing you.’ Or even challenging her to a duel in the first place, but she didn’t need to know that. ‘Just knocking a few of the rough edges off.’

Her face flushed, and the colonel of the Nusquan 1st exchanged a brief, startled glance with her second in command, which was followed almost at once by two hastily-suppressed grins. It seemed that young Forres had wasted no time in making a strong impression on her new regiment.

‘So what’s happening to the orks?’ Kasteen asked, bringing us all back to the point with rather more tact than most of the people around the table seemed capable of mustering.

‘A good question,’ I said, switching my attention smoothly back to the matter at hand. ‘If they’re not attacking us, they must either be gathering for a really big raid against a strongly defended target somewhere, or they’re migrating to another region, hoping the pickings will be easier.’

‘And which of those would be your guess, commissar?’ the Nusquan colonel asked, clearly addressing the question to me. Which, given that I’d seen more action against the greenskins than anyone else in the room by a considerable margin, should have been obvious. But before I could reply, Forres cut in, no doubt assuming that as the question had come from the commander of the regiment she’d been attached to, she was the one whose advice had been sought.

‘They’re obviously running away,’ she said, as though there couldn’t be the slightest doubt in the matter. ‘Greenskins never have the stomach for a protracted fight against a well-armed foe.’

‘On the contrary,’ I interjected, more amused by her precocity than annoyed at the interruption, ‘orks live for combat. They will retreat if they take sufficient casualties, but only in order to regroup; which, given the nature of the species, can often take some time, while they sort out the new pecking order. If they’re avoiding our patrols instead of engaging them, and harrying fewer outposts, they’re almost certainly gathering somewhere in the Spinal Range, getting ready for a full-scale invasion of the Barrens.’

‘Then we must strengthen our defences in readiness,’ Clothilde said

decisively, which was to save countless lives in the weeks ahead, although hardly in the manner which she envisaged at the time.

I nodded my agreement. 'That would be prudent,' I concurred, 'particularly around the foothills, and the approaches to Primadelving. That's the biggest prize on the planet, and if the greenskins are massing in sufficient numbers, they'll make for it like a ripper scenting blood.'

'They'd never dare attack us here,' Forres scoffed. 'We're far too well defended.'

'That didn't stop them during the invasion,' I said, remembering the desperate defence we'd had to mount against a seemingly unstoppable tide of the creatures, and how hideously close they'd come to overrunning the city before being beaten back at the very last minute.

'There are nothing like the same number of greenskins on the planet as there were then,' Clothilde said, and I realised for the first time that she'd probably been sitting right here while the barbaric creatures besieged her capital<sup>55</sup>, keeping an anxious eye on the state of the war.

'For which we must all thank the Emperor,' I agreed.

'I hate to labour the obvious,' Forres put in again, 'but if they are pulling back because the resistance in the Leeward Barrens is too strong, where are they likely to go instead?'

'A very good question,' I said, to her manifest surprise, and called up a detailed image of the mountain range. 'The largest concentrations we were able to detect by orbital reconnaissance before the weather closed in were here, here, and here.' Green icons flared, marking their positions, as Jurgen tweaked the controls on the elaborately inlaid control lectern. 'If they've returned to their old encampments, the most likely path of migration over the mountains is through these passes, which would place the western fringes of the Bifrost Marches most at risk. Particularly the townships along the Twilight Crevasse, and the manufactoria in Frozen Gorge.'

'A couple of companies ought to be enough to keep them bottled up in the mountains if they try to break out that way,' Kasteen said speculatively. 'At least until reinforcements arrive. I suggest the Nusquans deploy there, as they know the local terrain far better than we do.'

'We've got no intention of being sidelined,' the Nusquan colonel objected. 'My troopers would consider it a slur on their fighting ability.'

'For Throne's sake,' Kasteen riposted irritably, 'no one's implying anything of the sort. But it probably wouldn't hurt to redeploy them while

you've still got a few left.' Which may have been true, but was hardly tactful.

Eventually, a compromise was arrived at, which basically boiled down to palming the job off on the locals, and the meeting broke up in an atmosphere of simmering acrimony.

'Where do you think the greenskins are hiding themselves?' Kasteen asked afterwards, as we made our way along the corridor towards the elegant dining room which was now doing duty as the officers' mess.

I shrugged, feeling far from reassured, despite the measures we'd put in place to contain them in the event of an attack. In my experience, they were a foe it was easy to underestimate, and invariably fatal to do so. 'I suppose we'll find out before long,' I said, little guessing how horrifying the answer would turn out to be.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## ELEVEN

After that somewhat strained introduction, it was hardly surprising that the two regiments had as little to do with one another as possible, sticking strictly to their own areas of operation. The Valhallans went on applying the lessons learned in their centuries-long vendetta against the orks, while the Nusquans, urged on by Forres no doubt, persisted in squandering lives and materiel in head-on attacks at every opportunity. The militia were, if anything, even more reckless, every trooper determined to win a place in the Guard, and apparently convinced that acts of desperate bravado were the way to attract favourable attention, although what they mostly seemed to attract was copious amounts of incoming fire.

‘We’ll be running out of both at this rate,’ I commented sourly to Kasteen one evening. ‘Orks and Nusquans.’

‘Would that be so bad?’ she joked, surveying the regicide board between us through the cloud of steam rising from her tanna bowl. ‘Zyvan could leave us here to garrison the planet for a bit.’ Which would undoubtedly be a very appealing prospect to a Valhallan. I could live with it, too, come to that, especially if the governor continued to be as hospitable as she had been, and I could avoid setting foot on the snowfields too often.

‘Just in time for the rest of the greenskins to come out of hiding and invade the province,’ I riposted, failing to find a move which wouldn’t hand her victory on a platter.

Kasteen grinned. ‘You’re definitely talking me into it,’ she said, staring at me expectantly, until I bowed to the inevitable and conceded the game.

Accepting my surrender with a courteous nod, she began to set up the board for a rematch.

Before we could make the first move, however, we were interrupted by a familiar phlegm-laden cough from the doorway. 'Sorry to disturb you, sir, ma'am,' Jurgen said, 'but Major Broklaw would like you to join him in the command centre. The greenskins are up to something.'

'We'll be right there,' I told him, wondering what could be serious enough to warrant our attention as well as the major's.

I began to understand why he'd felt the need for reinforcements as we approached the command post, however, as several female voices were echoing down the corridor to meet us. The thick drapes and lavish carpeting would have muffled them at a normal conversational level, but most were raised and forceful, carrying easily to our ears. 'Does that sound like the governor to you?' I asked, and Kasteen nodded.

'It does,' she said grimly, as conscious as I was that anything serious enough to get Her Excellency out of bed was hardly likely to be a minor skirmish.

I glanced round the high-ceilinged room as we entered, picking out the centre of the disturbance easily from among the bustle of troopers hurrying to and fro about their business beneath the glittering chandeliers. To my complete lack of surprise it was centred around the hololith, from where Broklaw glanced up as we entered, with a distinct air of relief. Clothilde was talking to him, her usual constellation of hangers-on supplemented by the unexpected presence of a man (so far as I could tell under the hood of his robe, and the usual encrustation of augmetics) in the russet robes of a senior member of the Adeptus Mechanicus<sup>56</sup>.

Before I could take in any further details of his appearance my eye skipped past him, caught instead by the unmistakable black greatcoat of a fellow commissar. 'What's Forres doing here?' I wondered aloud.

'Holding Brecca's hand in case she starts showing a bit of common sense, probably,' Kasteen replied, which at least told me the name of the Nusquan colonel, who seemed to be conferring animatedly with Broklaw and the governor, a conversation which involved a great deal of gesticulation in the direction of the hololith. Wondering what could be so fascinating, I tried to catch a glimpse of the display, only to find my view blocked by the milling crowd of courtiers and a selection of Nusquan uniforms; the local militia had turned out in force as well, which, given the hour of the night, could

hardly be a good sign either. 'What worries me is what he wants.' She nodded in the direction of the tech-priest.

Before I could hazard a guess, Clothilde had swooped across the room like an expensively-coutured eldar pirate vessel, grappling my arm and steering me towards the hololith. 'Thank the Throne you're here, Ciaphas,' she said, oblivious to the black look that Forres aimed in our direction, no doubt inferring something scandalous from her use of my given name.

'It's no more than my duty,' I assured her, which happened to be true, although I'd probably have been there in any case; whatever was going on seemed pretty dire, and if I was going to get out of it with life and reputation intact, the more I knew the better. 'What's going on, exactly?'

'The orks have attacked two installations well behind our front line,' the governor told me, leading me across to the hololith, and pointing dramatically to the three-dimensional map being projected in the air above it. Two contact icons flared, worryingly close to Primadelving, and even more worryingly far from the fuzzy blobs marking the areas known to be infested. 'How could they have got through our defences without being detected?'

'A very good question,' Forres interjected, directing a withering look at Kasteen from beneath the brim of her cap. 'The Valhallans are supposed to be patrolling that area, are they not?'

'There's nothing supposed about it!' Kasteen snapped. 'Our people are all in place and doing their jobs.' She strode to the control lectern, and punched a few keys, bringing up the locations of our forward outposts. The line seemed firm enough to me, a reassuring bulwark against the massing warbands in the foothills.

'Then someone has clearly been negligent,' Forres shot back. 'Unless you seriously expect us to believe that the greenskins just slipped past your sentries without anyone noticing?' Brecca and a couple of the senior militia officers laughed humourlessly, underlining the point, and no doubt hoping to curry favour.

'They're not exactly subtle most of the time,' I said, with the quiet authority of experience, 'but orks can and do use guile if it suits them. They have specialists highly skilled in the art of infiltration, and quite capable of getting through even a heavily patrolled area unnoticed.' Not that I believed that in this case, any more than Kasteen clearly did; in my experience any infiltrators in the horde we were facing would be more interested in

eliminating one or two of our front line units, opening up a hole for the rest of the warband to pour through. If they'd penetrated deeply enough behind our lines to mount the attacks highlighted on the hololith, they'd almost certainly have been distracted by targets of opportunity on the way in, and forgotten all about the mission objective. Unless there was something here I was missing...

Forres's face was a mask of scepticism, but the governor was nodding in agreement with me. 'They took us by surprise several times during the invasion,' she recalled, 'so it's certainly possible.' The young commissar scowled, but had enough sense not to contradict her.

'No doubt the truth of how they got there will emerge once the shrine is retaken,' the tech-priest put in, which at least explained his interest in the matter; one of the sites must belong to the Adeptus Mechanicus, who, lacking skitarii of their own in this desolate backwater, would naturally want the Guard to sort out the problem on their behalf.

'Quite so,' I agreed, eager to prevent matters from getting bogged down in fruitless discussion. 'The important thing now is to retake both objectives as soon as possible.' I glanced at the hololith again. 'What exactly are we dealing with here? Major?'

Broklaw cleared his throat, addressing Kasteen and I directly, but pitching his voice so that it carried to the rest of the group around the flickering insubstantial image. 'Around two hours ago,' he said, 'the civic authorities lost contact with the agricultural caverns in South Rising.' He indicated one of the icons, pulsing a deep, ominous red. 'Garbled vox messages were received, leading them to believe that the cavern complex was being overrun with orks, but before anything else could be determined the link went dead.'

'So we've no reliable estimate of numbers,' Kasteen said, in even tones; only Broklaw and I knew her well enough to be aware of how very much that idea disturbed her.

'None at all,' Broklaw confirmed, 'but there were a couple of defence force squads on site, who seem to have been overwhelmed almost at once. And given the size and extent of the cavern system, I reckon we'll need at least a platoon to be sure of retaking it.'

'Get Lustig in here,' Kasteen said, and I nodded my agreement.

'Good choice,' I concurred. Sulla's former platoon sergeant had inherited her old command when she'd been given First Company to look after, and



was one of the most reliable and experienced warriors in the 597th. Though he'd accepted the concomitant promotion to lieutenant with some reluctance, he'd proven to be just as capable an officer as he'd been a squad leader, and I couldn't think of a safer pair of hands in which to leave the matter.

'Our Second Company are closer,' Brecca pointed out, indicating a small rash of Imperial icons between South Rising and the Lower Barrens<sup>57</sup>. 'If I order Fifth Platoon in right away they should catch the greenskins before they're ready for a counter-attack.'

In my experience greenskins were always ready for a counter-attack, but I cut off the thought before it could reach my tongue. If the Nusquans were willing to get stuck in, leaving an extra platoon of our troopers standing between me and the bulk of the warband, I had no objections at all. Noticing Kasteen bristle, and almost certainly on the verge of disputing the point, I nodded quickly. 'That makes sense,' I agreed, to the poorly concealed surprise of most of those present.

'Then we'll leave you to it,' Kasteen said, as wrongfooted as anyone else, but willing to follow my lead after all those years of campaigning together. We didn't always see eye to eye, but we trusted each other's judgement, and the matter didn't seem important enough to argue over. 'If your people need backup, we'll be standing by to assist.'

'That won't be necessary,' Forres assured us. 'I'll accompany the first wave myself to ensure everything goes smoothly.'

'I'd have expected nothing else,' I said, accurately, although she seemed to take it as a sign of approval, and nodded at me in reply.

'Then by your leave, milady, we'll return to our regiment and commence operations at once,' Brecca said, inclining her head to Clothilde.

'By all means.' Clothilde gave an airy wave of dismissal, and Brecca, Forres, and about half the militia staffers swept out at once, surrounded by the aura of their own good opinion of themselves.

'What the frak was all that about?' Broklaw demanded as soon as they were out of earshot. 'Those bluefeet<sup>58</sup> are going to get their heads handed to them.'

'So no change there, then,' I said, earning a swiftly-suppressed smile from each of them. 'But if they insist on sticking their hands in the grinder to see how sharp the blades are, at least they'll blunt them for whoever goes in afterwards to clean up the mess.'

‘Good point,’ Kasteen said, nodding. She turned to Broklaw. ‘Get Lustig briefed, and his people ready to move. If the Nusquans manage to handle it on their own, fine, but if they don’t, I’m not giving the greenskins the chance to scatter.’

‘They’d cause havoc this far behind our lines,’ Broklaw agreed. He turned to one of the local rankers, a middle-aged woman with greying hair and a prominent facial scar. ‘Can your people lay on a few Valkyries for transport?’

They wandered off to discuss the details in a quieter corner, leaving Kasteen and I to talk to Clothilde and the tech-priest, who finally introduced himself as Magos Izembard, one of the senior Adeptus Mechanicus on the planet. Which meant that the second installation the orks had attacked was probably the one we should really be worrying about. I looked at the hololith again, where the contact rune was still glowing an ominous red, then back to the Magos.

‘What’s so important about this shrine?’ I asked, trying to conceal my puzzlement. It didn’t seem to be sited anywhere strategic; just smack in the middle of a great deal of snow.

‘All the blessings of the Omnissiah are important,’ Izembard chided me, through a droning vox-coder uncomfortably reminiscent of the possessed servitor, ‘but on a world such as this, the genetoria particularly so.’

‘Indeed,’ I said, understanding at once. The power stations were probably the most vital installations on the entire planet: without the energy they provided, the habs would freeze, condemning everyone to a slow and uncomfortable death. ‘Are we in imminent danger from this one failing?’

Izembard shook his head, to my great relief. ‘There is a considerable degree of redundancy built into the system,’ he assured me. ‘We wouldn’t notice much difference if the supply of energy it provides were curtailed.’

‘It’s still running, then?’ Kasteen interjected, in some surprise.

The colonel and I exchanged puzzled glances. Greenskins would hardly have bothered to keep the systems intact; in our experience they were more likely to have smashed anything left functioning after they took the place for the sheer joy of wanton destruction, or begun ripping out anything that looked vaguely useful in the hope of selling it to one of their mechanics<sup>59</sup>.

‘For the moment,’ Izembard said, in a manner which, in someone whose voice was capable of emotional resonance, I would have to describe as evasive. ‘But that may not continue for long.’

Although I couldn't have said why, I felt a deep disquiet stirring in me at those words, and it was plain that Kasteen shared my misgivings.

'And why would that be?' Clothilde asked, abruptly reminding me that she was still attached to my arm, apparently for the foreseeable future.

'Because of the nature of the generators,' Izembard explained; if he was at all put out by having attracted the governor's attention, he gave no sign of it, just droning on in the same mechanical monotone. 'Like almost all in the province they use geothermal energy to create power.'

'That was in the briefing slates we got with the assignment,' I said, omitting to add that I hadn't bothered reading any of them. No harm in at least appearing to be on top of the situation.

'I doubt that they will have gone into the details of the process,' Izembard said evenly, about as willing to be deflected from his prepared lecture as a charging Khorne cultist from thoughts of massacre. 'Essentially simple, it requires stringent monitoring to remain safe.'

'What do you mean, "remain safe?"' Kasteen asked, in tones which made it abundantly clear that she liked the sound of the phrase no more than I did.

'Without entering into the subtle complexities of the technotheology,' Izembard droned, showing no sign of irritation at having been so cavalierly interrupted, 'water is pumped down to the lava flow, which is quite close to the surface at that point. The intense heat converts it instantly into steam, which powers the turbines.'

'Are we getting to the "but" any time soon?' Kasteen asked, not bothering to conceal her impatience. 'Because we need to get the orks contained before they do any more damage, and I'm not sending my people in blind if I can help it.'

'The "but," as you put it, is that unless the flow of incoming water is kept to a constant rate, excess steam can build up, creating extreme pressure in the magma chamber,' Izembard explained, as imperturbable as ever. 'Unless relieved by the proper rituals, it will eventually vent itself uncontrollably.'

'You mean it'll blow up?' I interjected, unable to keep the consternation out of my voice.

'Blow up would be something of a misnomer,' Izembard said, after a moment's cogitation. 'Erupt would be a more accurate description.'

'How big a bang are we talking about?' I demanded, hardly in the mood to split hairs.

‘It’s hard to be precise,’ Izembard said, ‘without accurate figures for the rate of flow, temperature fluctuations, and the porosity of the rock, but somewhere in the low kilotonne range seems the most likely.’

‘And how soon?’ Kasteen asked, looking as shocked as I felt.

‘Again, it’s hard to be accurate,’ Izembard mused for a moment. ‘But I would estimate somewhere in the region of four to five hours.’

‘Plenty of time to get in there,’ I said. ‘Can the process be stopped?’ Because if it couldn’t, going in to tackle the orks would be a huge waste of time. Better to just cordon off the area, keep them penned in, and mop up any survivors after the bang.

‘Indeed it can,’ Izembard assured me, with a smile I found deeply disturbing. ‘A man of your intellect should find the instructions for stabilising the geothermal reaction perfectly easy to follow.’ He and Clothilde looked at me expectantly, and, with an all-too-familiar sinking feeling, I realised they were expecting me to take care of the matter myself. ‘It would, of course, be preferable to send a tech-priest with the requisite knowledge, but their chances of survival would not be high under the circumstances. Far better to restaff the shrine once the orks are out of the way.’

‘Can’t fault the logic of that,’ I agreed, wishing that I could. Once again, it seemed, my unwanted reputation was about to frogmarch me into harm’s way, and there didn’t seem to be a thing I could do to avoid it.



## TWELVE

Which didn't stop me from trying, of course, but every reason I could come up with to palm the job off on somebody else sounded hollow even to me; and besides, Forres had been seen to be leading her contingent from the front, so I could hardly appear reluctant to do the same. I'd just have to go through with it, and hope the troopers with me would keep the greenskins off my back.

Accordingly, I found myself in the passenger compartment of the antiquated-looking Valkyrie Broklaw's friend in the local forces had found for us, battling our way through another of the blizzards so common on the surface of Nusquam Fundumentibus. The airframe groaned audibly as the seat beneath me lurched, and I checked my chronograph anxiously, hoping that Izembard had erred on the side of caution in his estimate of the time left until the power plant vaporised. Assuming we arrived at all.

'Are we nearly there yet?' Jurgen asked, his face beneath its habitual patina of grime a little paler than usual, and I nodded grimly.

'We are,' I reassured him, gripping the arms of my seat a little more tightly as the Valkyrie hit another crosswind. If the Leeward Barrens were supposed to be the sheltered part of the hemisphere, I shuddered to think what conditions would have been like on the far side of the mountain range. No wonder the Nusquans had so few aircraft.

'Good,' Jurgen said, busying himself with the tenth unnecessary inspection of his melta since we'd taken off. Reassured that the powerpack was fully charged, and the emitters properly aligned, he began mumbling something

under his breath that might have been the Litany of Accuracy, but which, knowing him as I did, I strongly suspected to be an inventively unfounded slander of our pilot's abilities and antecedents.

'We have a visual,' the pilot informed me, his voice echoing tinnily in my comm-bead, and I glanced out of the viewport, grateful that the movement took my nose as far away as possible from my aide.

'Take us round,' I said, 'wide and slow.' I wanted a good look at the objective before we set foot in it, in so far as it was possible to get a good look at anything with visibility so drastically obscured by the flurrying snow. 'And be prepared to suppress any sign of resistance.' Given their indifference to physical hardship, it was more than likely that there were orks on the surface, and if there were they were bound to start taking potshots at us. Then, struck by another thought, I added, 'Don't use the Hellstrikes unless you have to. Stick to the multi-laser.'

'Roger that,' the pilot responded, not quite managing to conceal his irritation at being told how to do his job. To be honest, I didn't think the heavy missiles slung under the wings were all that likely to spark off the explosion we were here to prevent, but you never could tell. Even if it didn't, I was pretty sure the Adeptus Mechanicus would take a dim view of their precious shrine being knocked about even more badly than the orks had already managed to do.

But, as we continued to circle, no enemy fire rose to challenge us.

'They must be inside, out of the cold,' Jurgen said, his airsickness apparently forgotten with the prospect of action so close, craning his head for a better look, and coming too close to my nose for comfort.

'We'll warm 'em up,' Magot said from the seat behind me, and snapped a fresh powercell into her lasgun with every sign of relish. 'Right, sarge?'

'Right.' Sergeant Grifen nodded, her clipped tones calmly professional. 'When we hit the deck, secure the ramp. Team one with me and the commissar. Team two follow us inside as soon as the Valkyrie lifts, while we cover you. OK?'

'You've got it,' Magot assured her, visibly pleased to have the first chance to take a crack at the orks. She and Grifen were close, personally as well as professionally, and could be relied on to anticipate one another's moves in the heat of battle without any discussion, an easy rapport which had made them my first choice of squad leaders for this assignment.

As we spiralled in, however, it looked as though Magot was going to be

disappointed. There were no traces of occupying orks that we could see, just the communication and distribution towers<sup>60</sup>, and the squat bulk of the turbine sanctuary looming out of the flurrying snow like an image on a badly-tuned pict-caster. A snow-choked landing pad drew our attention to its presence with a ring of flashing lights, a small blockhouse on the periphery providing access to the bulk of the complex, which, like almost every-thing else on Nusquam Fundamentibus, had been hollowed out underground, away from the ferocious conditions on the surface.

‘No obvious signs of damage,’ I reported, the vox-unit in the cockpit relaying my words to Izembard, listening in from the warmth and comfort of Primadelving, and the other squads in the platoon, who were supposed to be in position around the installation by now to intercept any greenskins making a break for it. (And come to our aid as fast as their transports could carry them if the barbaric xenos turned out to be there in greater numbers than we’d anticipated.) The palms of my hands tingled briefly as I spoke; if the orks had indeed invaded the complex, there should have been clear traces of their presence: scarring on the walls from the stray stubber and bolter rounds, which would have been shot off with their usual abandon, at the very least.

‘No vehicles parked, either,’ Jurgen added. His face contorted for a moment with the effort of ratiocination. ‘Could they have come on foot?’

‘It’s a long way to walk if they did,’ I said, although, given the hardness of the average ork, that didn’t necessarily rule out the possibility. ‘And if they didn’t have vehicles, that would have made it a lot easier to slip through our lines undetected.’

‘So we’ll only have a small group to worry about,’ Grifen said, with the assurance only a Valhallan could bring to a discussion of orkish strategy and tactics. ‘Bad news is that if they made it this far undetected, we’re up against infiltrators, and good ones at that. We’ll need to keep an eye out for ambushes and booby traps every step of the way.’

I nodded in agreement. ‘So we go in cautiously, checking for tripwires.’ I took another look at my chronograph, and wished I hadn’t; the time to Izembard’s earliest estimate was far shorter than I would have liked, and if we had to waste time pussyfooting around instead of heading straight for the objective, our margin for error was going to be gobbled up rapidly. There was no help for it, though, so I voxed the pilot again. ‘Take us in,’ I said, hoping for the best, but bracing myself for the worst as usual.

We grounded in the middle of the pad, the rear loading ramp dropping with a clang on the retro-blackened 'crete, and the cramped passenger compartment suddenly became full of flurryng snow. Gritting my teeth against the razor-edged wind which billowed in with it, I took my place behind Grifen, and followed her hurrying form out into the blizzard. Magot's team had fanned out around the ramp, peering over their lasguns at the snow-shrouded hummocks which surrounded the pad, and which for a moment my imagination insisted were greenskins lying in ambush. Then reason reasserted itself, and I realised they were nothing more threatening than fuelling points, their hoses retracted, waiting for shuttles to arrive with supplies and rotating staff.

Which reminded me... 'Weren't we told there were seventeen people here when the orks attacked?' I asked.

'We were,' Grifen confirmed.

'And not one of them got to a vox.'

Which was disturbing, to say the least. However stealthily the orks had approached it, the installation itself was too big to have been taken in a concerted rush, and most of the cogboys working there would have had several minutes to raise the alarm before falling to the barbarous invaders.

'The greenskins must have moved fast, then,' the sergeant said in response to my vocalised musings. 'Or there were more than we thought.'

'There are always more than you think,' Magot said cheerfully, her enthusiasm for a target-rich environment as keen as ever.

Grifen, a quartet of troopers, Jurgen and I double-timed it across the bare rockcrete, our bootsoles splashing in the refreezing slush where the covering of snow had been blown clear or melted by the Valkyrie's landing jets, and made it into the lee of the blockhouse without attracting any incoming fire. Which wasn't all that surprising, as any orks on the surface would have announced their presence by blazing away at the Valkyrie on its final approach, but by that point in my career I'd found it safest not to take anything for granted.

'The door's locked,' Grifen reported, with an air of surprise.

It was true, as a couple of experimental tugs was enough to confirm, and I felt a shiver of unease displacing the one engendered by the bitter cold. The rune pad was intact, with no sign of the blast damage I'd have expected if the orks had succeeded in forcing an entry.

While I was pondering the implications of that, the shriek of the Valkyrie's



engine rose to a pitch which threatened to strip the enamel from my teeth. I glanced back to see it rising from the ground, Magot and her troopers hunkering down against the scorching backwash, their eyes narrowed.

‘We’ll keep circling,’ the pilot voxed, ‘in case the greenskins show themselves.’

‘Don’t go too far,’ I cautioned, and the pilot chuckled.

‘We’ll be there when you need us,’ he promised, and disappeared into the murk above our heads, the sound of his engine slowly blending in to the unending wind.

‘So how do we open it?’ Grifen asked, looking at me with a puzzled expression on her face, no doubt as uneasy as I felt.

‘I can get us in,’ Jurgen said confidently, raising his melta, and sighting on the lock.

‘Wait.’ I raised a hand to forestall him. ‘They might have rigged charges to it.’ Not a problem if the melta vaporised them before they went off, of course, but very bad news if the thermal shock of a near-miss made them detonate. I fumbled in a pocket for my data-slate, with clumsy, cold-numbed fingers. ‘The magos gave me a schematic. Maybe the codes are in the map keys.’

Fortunately they were; I tapped in the numerals, and to my relieved surprise the runes on the pad suddenly changed colour from red to green, before being replaced by the words ‘access authorised’.

‘It worked,’ I said, replacing the slate, along with an overly-generous portion of melting slush, in my greatcoat pocket, leaning against the door as I did so. To my surprise it suddenly moved, squealing aside on poorly-greased runners, sending me staggering into the corridor beyond.

‘Commissar?’ Grifen said, almost as taken aback as I was. I held up a cautioning hand as I recovered my balance. Nothing had blown me up or shot at me, and no axe-wielding greenskin berserkers had come howling out of the darkness, so I might as well look as though I’d taken point on purpose.

‘Wait a moment,’ I said, fumbling a luminator out of my pocket, and flashing it around. ‘Let’s just make sure it’s safe before anyone else comes in.’ I seemed to be in a tunnel, which was no surprise, angling gently downwards, wide enough for a pallet loader to trundle along, or for four people to walk in line abreast.

‘Luminator controls are usually next to the door,’ Magot put in helpfully,

and, directing the beam back towards the rectangle of daylight fringed with curious faces, I was able to pick them out with little difficulty.

‘There you go, sir,’ Jurgen said, slapping the activation plate with the heel of his hand, and a line of overhead luminators began to flicker on ahead of us, lighting the way down into the heart of the complex.

‘Want me to close it again?’ Magot asked, as she passed through the portal with the four troopers under her command.

‘Better not,’ I said. We were as sure as we could be that there were no orks on the surface ready to follow us down, and my paranoia was always a little less acute for knowing we had a fast line of retreat open behind us; especially on this occasion, when, if something went wrong, we’d need to get out before the plant blew up. ‘The flyboys’ll pick off any greenskins who get near it anyway.’

‘Works for me,’ Magot agreed, trotting past to take point, with her team at her heels.

The rest of us followed, ever wary, our bootsoles ringing on the rockcrete floor despite our efforts to make as little noise as possible. We kept our eyes open for ambush or booby traps, checking every shadow, but seeing nothing, the absence of any concrete threat somehow even more disquieting than a charge of bellowing orks would have been. At least then we’d have known what we were dealing with. (Although, of course, if I’d really known what we were dealing with, I’d have been halfway back to the Valkyrie by now.)

At length we came to another door blocking the end of the passage; I was about to consult the data-slate again when it slid smoothly aside, revealing a neatly whitewashed wall beyond, embellished with a frieze of miscellaneous machine parts, which no doubt meant something in the iconography of the Adeptus Mechanicus. We instantly raised our weapons<sup>61</sup>, seeking a target, but no one came through, and after a moment we relaxed again, seeing the unmistakable hand of the Omnissiah at work. Clearly the machine-spirits of the power plant recognised us as friends, and were working to aid us, a realisation which heartened us all.

‘Clear left,’ Trooper Vorhees reported, levelling his lasgun down the corridor, while Drere, his inseparable companion, aimed in the opposite direction, the faint *click! hiss!* of her augmetic lungs echoing eerily in the stillness.

‘Clear right,’ Drere echoed a heartbeat later, and the rest of us followed,

the map on the screen in my hand leading us ever deeper into the heart of the complex.

‘Still no sign of any damage,’ Grifen murmured, clearly as perturbed by that as I was.

‘Or of any of the cogboys,’ I agreed.

‘Then the greenskins must have killed ’em all,’ Magot said, as though that were a foregone conclusion.

‘Unless they took the survivors prisoner, so they could keep the plant operating,’ I suggested. Orks commonly enslaved humans who seemed to possess skills they could use, although the unfortunate captives seldom lasted long.

‘Why would they do that?’ Grifen asked, and I shrugged, unable to find an answer.

‘Found something,’ Vorhees reported from further up the tunnel, holding up a hand to check our progress, and glancing down at the floor a few metres ahead of where he stood. ‘Looks like blood.’

‘A lot of it,’ Drere agreed, trotting up to join him.

They were right, a large splash of it staining the grey rockcrete floor a rusty brown, around a still tacky centre, which shone with a sickly crimson sheen in the light of the overhead luminators. I scanned the walls, seeing no sign of any pockmarks or cratering; if someone had been shot here, it had been with a precision and accuracy completely foreign to the greenskins.

‘Must have taken them down hand to hand,’ Grifen said, having come to the same conclusion.

‘Then where’s the body?’ I asked rhetorically. Orks would have looted the corpse of their victim and left it where it fell, unless they were hungry, and in that case we’d have found a lot more mess than just a pool of blood.

‘Dragged it away?’ Jurgen suggested, and I shook my head.

‘Then there’d be a trail of blood on the floor,’ I pointed out. The stain was clear-edged, unelongated.

‘Carried it, then,’ my aide said, unperturbed.

That was possible, I supposed; an ork would certainly be strong enough to carry a cadaver, but what would be the point? ‘That seems remarkably tidy for an ork,’ I said, but Jurgen just nodded, his constitutional immunity to sarcasm serving him as well as it always did.

‘There are scratches on the floor here,’ Drere reported, another handful of metres down the tunnel. The hairs on the back of my neck began to prickle,

for reasons I couldn't quite articulate, as I squatted down to examine them. 'Some sort of cart, you reckon?'

'Could be,' I said, my old underhiver's survival skills letting me read the faint pattern of blemishes on the floor as easily as a sheet of print. Innumerable trolleys or carts had been wheeled along the corridor, as you'd have expected in a complex like this. But something about the marks Drere had found looked familiar, and different from the rest. Faint parallel scratches, as though something large, with clawed feet, had strolled through here not too long ago.

Vorhees spread his fingers, spanning the inner and outer scratches, finding his splayed hand fit comfortably between them. He flexed his fingers thoughtfully, and glanced at Drere, the two of them evidently coming to the same conclusion.

'Do they have ambulls on Nusquam Fundumentibus?' he asked, which seemed like a perfectly reasonable question to me. The last time we'd been on an iceworld we'd come across a whole colony of the creatures, which definitely shouldn't have been there<sup>62</sup>, and if it happened once it could probably happen again. Drere and Vorhees looked at one another, no doubt remembering that it was an ambull which had torn half her chest away on Simia Orichalcae, and that she'd been damn lucky to get back to the mining hab's sanitorium fast enough to get the damaged organs replaced.

'Could be an ambull track,' I agreed. It hardly seemed likely, but if they wanted to look out for ambulls as well as orks that was fine by me.

As we moved on, I took a final glance at the faint parallel scratches, and found Jorgen doing the same, his brow furrowed. 'Reminds me of something,' he said, coughing raucously, and marking the spot with a generous deposit of mucus, 'but I can't think what.'

'No, me neither,' I said, taking a firmer hold of my chainsword and laspistol. In the years we'd served together we'd faced so much that it was hardly surprising some of the details had got blurred along the way<sup>63</sup>. Nevertheless, we both kept our weapons readily to hand, and our progress, when it resumed, was even more cautious than it had been.

We were to find about a dozen more of the disquieting bloodstains before we reached the heart of the complex, but no other signs of the tech-priests who were supposed to be manning the place. In a couple of instances the spilled blood had been adulterated by lubricants and hydraulic fluid,

indicating that this was where some of the larger servitors had met the same fate as their masters; which sparked another echo of memory. Since it stubbornly refused to come into focus, however, I merely shrugged and let it go, knowing from experience that the more I tried to force it, the more elusive the thought would become.

From time to time we came across more of the scratches in the floor, too, and ever since Vorhees had raised the matter, I'd found myself wondering if we ought to be looking for some kind of beast on the loose as well as the orks. Perhaps, in retrospect, this was why I didn't recognise the true nature of the threat we were facing until it was almost too late; my mind running along predetermined pathways, instead of remaining open to the evidence around me.

'This must be it,' I said at last, pausing outside a door which, unlike the others we'd passed through, refused to open at our approach. The temperature had risen steadily as we descended, so that by now I felt quite comfortable, and my Valhallan companions had opened their greatcoats to reveal the body armour beneath them, clearly wishing we were back on the surface where it was a nice comfortable thirty below.

'Looks like it,' Grifen agreed, scowling at another runeplated locking mechanism.

'Hang on,' I said, squinting at the data-slate again. But before I could find the codes I needed, Jurgen simply pushed the door open with his grubby fingertips, and poked the barrel of his melta through in search of a target.

'It's unlocked,' he said.

'Well it shouldn't be,' I said, recalling the instructions Izembard had given me. 'The power core and the control chapel are the most sanctified areas of the entire shrine. Access is supposed to be restricted to the most devout acolytes.'

The squad of troopers around me began to look at one another uneasily. It was one thing to be making a recon sweep through the main body of the complex, especially with the prospect of an ork or two to bag, but quite another to be trespassing on its most hallowed ground.

'And us,' I added cheerfully, raising a few nervous smiles in response.

'Then let's get in there, and get on with it,' Magot said, looking a great deal happier.

'Quite,' I said, with another glance at my chronograph. We had only a handful of minutes remaining before the short end of Izembard's estimate

expired, and I wanted to be in the control chapel well before it did. I have to confess to finding our slow progress to this point irksome in the extreme, but, under the circumstances, proceeding with caution had been the only sensible option; and now was hardly the time to abandon it. The enemy we'd failed to contact on the way in would almost certainly be in or around our objective: I could think of no other reason for them not to have engaged us in combat before now.

We edged our way warily inside, me hanging back as much as I decently could, and looked around, orientating ourselves. I'd visited the inner sanctums of Mechanicus shrines on several occasions before now, almost invariably with equal reluctance, so I had some idea of what to expect; the burnished metal surfaces of control lecterns, reflecting the lights and dials which were supposed to tell their operators Emperor alone knew what, were all in place, but instead of the gleaming steel or brass walls embossed with the sacred cogwheel I'd expected, the chamber was bounded with naked rock, which had been hewn into a high-ceilinged cavern. (And into which the devotional icons of the tech-priests had been duly chiselled.)

Magot grimaced. 'Who let that one rip?' she asked, with a pointed glance in Jurgen's direction.

'The inner sanctum connects directly with the volcanic vents,' I told her.

Jurgen sniffed the sulphur-reeking air. 'Smells like Hell's Edge,' he said, and I nodded, reminded all too strongly of the settlement beside the magma lake on Periremunda, and the unpleasant surprise which had awaited us there.

'Secure the section,' Grifen ordered, and the troopers fanned out, one team to each of the tunnel mouths leading off from opposite sides of the chamber.

'Good idea,' I agreed, shoving the door closed behind us. There was a lot of the complex we hadn't covered on our way in, and the last thing we needed was to be taken by surprise by an ork or two sneaking up on us while we were engrossed in carrying out Izembard's instructions. The thin slab of metal wouldn't delay them for more than a couple of seconds, but the noise they made forcing it open would be all the warning we needed. 'Jurgen, keep the exit covered.'

'Very good, sir,' he replied, dragging a chair from behind the nearest of the lecterns. He subsided onto it, his melta aimed squarely at the door, resting comfortably on top of the abandoned control station.

I handed him the data-slate, after paging down to the directions the tech-

priest had given me. 'I'll need both hands for this,' I told him, looking around at the instrumentation surrounding us. There were a lot of flashing lights and flickering dials, rather too many of them red or with the needles bouncing back and forth against their stops for my liking. 'Where do I start?'

'Three lecterns on a dais, it says here,' Jurgen told me, his forehead furrowing. 'What's a dais?'

'This is.' I mounted the circular platform, around the circumference of which three lecterns were equidistantly spaced, so that their operators would be facing outwards across the room. They'd all remained at their posts with single-minded dedication or been taken by surprise at exactly the same time, judging by the amount of blood which had been spilled here, and I moved gingerly, the soles of my boots adhering unpleasantly to the still tacky floor.

'The one facing the door should have a dial on it,' my aide continued, 'saying "Flow Chamber Pressure". Is the needle anywhere near the red bit?'

I looked down at the dial in question. 'If it was any deeper into it,' I said, 'it would be about to go round again.' The indicator was hard against the stop at the limit of its display, and I didn't need a tech-priest to tell me that things were looking grim. 'Which buttons do I press?'

'None of 'em,' Jurgen said. 'It says here you need the emergency pressure vent, on the pumps themselves. Down the left-hand corridor.'

'Left as I'm facing, or as we came in?' I asked, already on the move.

'As you're facing,' Jurgen said, and I abruptly reversed direction, heading for the opposite tunnel mouth. He rose to his feet as I sprinted past. 'Should I come too?' he asked, and I shook my head.

'Keep covering our backs,' I told him, glancing back as I did so. 'If this doesn't work we'll have to get out of here fast, and we won't want any greenskins getting in the way.' He was already out of sight by the time I finished, but our comm-beads relayed the rest of my words comfortably enough.

Despite the urgency of my errand, I found my pace slowing as I entered the chamber, unable to prevent myself from glancing around in awestruck astonishment. I was in a huge natural cavern, the walls fissured and cracked, many of them leaking foul-smelling vapours; no doubt the removal of a sense of smell was high on the list of augmetic enhancements for the tech-priests who worked here. In the centre of it the pumps rose, three or

four times the height of a man, pipes a metre or more in diameter driven deep into the rock beneath my feet, or cutting horizontally across the cavern to disappear into the wall. Several of them pointed in the direction of the turbine hall we'd seen on our way in, while others presumably carried the water from wherever it was collected, ready to be forced down into the bowels of the planet.

'Commissar!' Sergeant Grifen waved to me from beneath the shadow of the nearest of the pumps. 'I think you should see this.'

'So long as it's quick,' I said, acutely aware of every tick of the clock. But Grifen was a veteran, and as cognisant of the danger as I was; she wouldn't divert my attention at so critical a juncture without excellent reason.

'We've found the bodies,' she said, sounding oddly uncertain. 'Bits of them, anyway. I think.'

As I rounded the huge metal tree trunk, I could see the reason for her reticence. A tangle of blood-slick metal and glass was piled up against the cavern wall, glittering eerily in the light from the overhead luminators.

'Janni recognised them,' Vorhees said, with a glance at Drere, who nodded.

'Augmetics. Believe me, I'd know.' Her mechanical lungs punctuated her words with an even *hiss! click!* 'Looks like someone ripped them clean out of the cogboys.'

'Or spat them out,' I said, a peculiar crawling sensation moving up and down my spine as the memories of Hell's Edge grew more vivid. The very notion was ridiculous, but I'd seen something almost identical then, and once planted the thought refused to go away. 'Keep away from the fissures!'

'Commissar?' Grifen looked at me quizzically, no doubt wondering if I'd taken leave of my senses.

'The fissures!' I gestured to the cracks in the surface of the rock. The mound of grisly trophies was right beneath the largest, which certainly looked big enough to take a human cadaver; especially if it had been filleted of its non-organic components first.

'Have you pulled the lever yet, sir?' Jurgen voxed.

'Just about to.' Recalled to the matter of the moment I turned back to the bulkiest of the metal structures. As Izembard had assured me, a large control lectern was set into it, almost completely obscured by the number of prayer slips and wax seals adhering to its surface.



Before I had taken more than a couple of strides, however, my attention was arrested by a faint echo of movement, almost inaudible over the steady rumbling of the mechanisms around us and the chugging of the pumps. I froze, listening intently, half convinced I'd imagined it.

Then I heard it again, an unmistakable scuttling. 'Pull back!' I called, gesticulating wildly. 'Get away from the walls!'

Clearly still puzzled, Grifen and her troopers scurried to comply; she, Vorhees and Drere no doubt remembering our expedition through the ambull tunnels beneath Simia Orichalcae all too vividly. One of the troopers with them, a recent replacement we'd picked up on Coronus, was a little slower, aiming his lasgun down the dark cleft in the rock beside him from what he undoubtedly imagined was a safe distance.

'I can hear some...' he began, before his voice choked off in a panic-stricken scream, as something dark and fast with too many limbs erupted from the fissure. He managed to get off about three shots before going down, torn to shreds in a flurry of blows from the creature's razor-edged talons.

'What's going on?' Jurgen voxed urgently, alerted by the noise. 'Are the orks attacking?'

'There never were any orks!' I shouted, as the four-armed monstrosity rose from the corpse of the eviscerated trooper, absently licking his blood from its face with a tongue that seemed far too long, to stare speculatively in our direction. 'The place is swarming with tyrannids!'



## THIRTEEN

‘Tyranids?’ Jurgen echoed, taking the news as phlegmatically as he always did. ‘No one told us about them.’

The scuttling noise was all around us now, and even as the ’gaunt launched itself at me with its powerful hind legs, more of the creatures began to emerge from the rents in the rocks. ‘Pull back!’ I yelled, clipping it with a round from my laspistol, but the hideous creature barely slowed, its slavering maw gaping as it bounded in my direction with single-minded ferocity.

The troopers opened up with their lasguns, dropping several of the newcomers, but the swarm had been well and truly roused by now, and for every one that fell another came skittering out of the shadows with murderous intent, while reinforcements continued to pour through the clefts in the walls as though the rock itself was sweating tyranids. I parried the first slash of the oncoming ’gaunt’s scything claws with my chainsword, biting deep into its chitin-armoured thorax, and shot it through the brain as it opened its mouth to either scream defiance or attempt to bite my face off<sup>64</sup>.

‘Can you still get to the lever?’ Jurgen asked, ever mindful of our mission. I looked again at the largest pump, with its prominent control lectern; a dozen ’gaunts were bounding across the intervening space, and more movement flickered in the shadows at the base of the great metal column, almost as if they were guarding it<sup>65</sup>.

‘Not a chance,’ I told him, as a volley of lasgun fire took out the three

leading 'nids, just as they began angling to cut us off from the tunnel we'd entered by. I'd be torn to pieces before I even got halfway to the controls, let alone begun the intricate rituals required to override whatever instructions the machine-spirits within them currently had. I put a las-bolt through the thorax of another 'gaunt, which had hurled itself at me in the wake of the first, and turned back to the tunnel.

'Team two coming to assist,' Magot voxed, to my heartfelt relief.

'Stay in the control chapel and be ready to cover us,' Grifen responded. 'We're coming in with a swarm on our arses.'

'And get that Valkyrie back on the ground,' I voxed the pilot. If we managed to make it as far as the surface, I didn't want to go up with the power plant just because our ride was late.

'We'll be waiting,' the pilot promised, 'with the ramp down.'

Then my attention was completely taken up with the urgent matter of survival. The creatures clustered around the pumps had ranged weapon symbiotes fused to their forelimbs, the sinister hiss of their discharges almost lost in the general cacophony.

'Take out the gunners!' I bellowed. The close combat bioforms were only a danger if they got within reach of us, but the living ammunition of the fleshborers would devour us alive from the inside out if their bearers managed to get off a lucky shot. Fortunately for us, the superior range of the troopers' lasguns kept the 'nid gunners too far distant for accurate shooting, the deadly hail of tiny beetles they spat in our direction either falling short or going wide. But still they came, closing the distance every time we were forced to switch our aim to pick off a charging hormagaunt.

'We can't hold 'em off for long,' Vorhees commented, firing short bursts in an attempt to conserve ammunition, but which we both knew would drain the powerpack frighteningly fast in any case.

'Then don't try!' I urged, already running for the tunnel mouth. 'We need to stay ahead of them!' Lacking the powerful hind legs of their compatriots, which were bred by the hive mind to get into close combat as fast as possible, the termagants should be easy enough to outpace; or at least keep from getting into fleshborer range too quickly.

I squeezed off a couple of shots at an outflanking hormagaunt, which was using its superior speed to try and cut us off from the tunnel we'd entered by, but the las-bolts ricocheted harmlessly from its exoskeleton; already committed to the attack, I ducked under a strike from its scything claws, felt

the talon of one of its middle limbs catch for a moment in the fabric of my greatcoat, and rammed the tip of my chainsword up under its chin, tearing through throat and skull alike as I struggled to free the blade. A gout of vile-smelling ichor soaked my sleeve, and then I was clear, hurdling the carcass of another of the vile creatures, which had just been brought down by the lasgun fire of one of my companions.

‘Grenades!’ Grifen called, as we broke through the tightening noose to gain the dubious sanctuary of the tunnel.

‘Good plan,’ I agreed, turning to loose a couple of pistol shots at whatever was directly behind us, and finding that the entire width of the passageway was choked with bounding predators. I hit one in the leg, purely by luck, and it stumbled, impeding those behind it; which reacted by removing the obstruction in the most straightforward manner possible, slashing it to pieces in an instant. The only positive thing I could see in our situation was that at least the ’gaunts about to tear us apart were blocking the fire of their weaker broodmates with the ranged weapons.

Grifen yanked a frag grenade out from beneath her coat, and lobbed it over her shoulder without breaking stride<sup>66</sup>. The troopers did the same, and, although it was probably my imagination, I could swear I heard the clatter of the canisters hitting the rockcrete over the scuttling and hissing of the brood behind us. Then the onrushing tide of chitinous death rolled over them.

Just as I’d begun to convince myself that the fuses had been too long, and my shoulder-blades tensed in anticipation of a bone-shattering blow from behind, a quartet of overlapping explosions shook the corridor, jarring the floor beneath my feet. Unable to resist glancing back, I saw that the pursuing swarm had all but vanished, the walls and ceiling decorated with shreds of flesh and gouts of ichor; but before I had time to take in any more, the second wave surged into the passageway, flowing towards us with undiminished purpose. Once again the fleshborers hissed, and a clump of the deadly beetles they used as ammunition hit the floor a metre from where I was standing. The tiny creatures scurried around frantically for a second or two, in search of a host to burrow into, then mercifully expired.

‘Termagants incoming!’ I voxed, then turned and sprinted for the relative sanctuary of the control chapel.

‘We’re ready for ’em,’ Magot assured me, to my inexpressible relief; then we were clear of the tunnel, flinging ourselves aside to allow our

companions a clear shot.

The results were devastating. Magot had flicked her lasgun to full auto, and the troopers under her command had either followed her lead or been instructed to do so: a hail of fire scoured the tunnel, supplemented by a blast or two from Jurgen's melta for good measure. When the noise ceased, the passageway resembled nothing so much as a butcher's slab, the deadly organisms which had pursued us so relentlessly ripped apart by the merciless barrage as effectively as they'd threatened to do to us.

'That's seen 'em off,' Magot said, with a fair dose of optimism, considering she'd seen for herself just how implacable the tyranids could be during their abortive invasion of Periremunda.

'I wouldn't count on it,' I cautioned, and, sure enough, the unmistakable skittering sound of claws on rock were already forcing their way through the dying echoes of Magot's massacre. 'They'll come after us again as soon as they realise we're not defending the choke point.'

'Then let's not hang around till they work it out,' Grifen said, a sentiment I heartily agreed with.

'Why didn't they attack us as soon as we arrived?' Jurgen asked, falling into place at my shoulder, his melta reassuringly ready for use. 'They'd have taken us completely by surprise.'

'I don't think they realised we were here,' I said. 'They'd already killed everyone in the shrine.' That much was a given; a swarm the size of the one we'd just encountered would have scoured the place before anyone had time to react.

Jurgen nodded. 'So they were sleeping it off when we arrived,' he said, his brow furrowed with the effort of joining the dots.

'Essentially,' I agreed, although some of the details of what we'd found continued to nag at me. It made sense that the swarm would make for the deepest part of the complex to digest its meal, the instinctive behaviour of its constituent organisms would ensure that, but how had so many of the creatures got inside in the first place? The main entrance had definitely been sealed when we arrived.

'At least we won't have to worry about tripping any greenskin booby traps on the way out,' Grifen commented, as we double-timed our way back towards the pad.

'That's something,' I agreed, straining my ears for the scrabbling of talons against the rockcrete floor behind us. I was just beginning to hope, against

all reason and experience of the hideous creatures, that we'd succeeded in intimidating them so thoroughly that they'd given up the pursuit, when, faintly at first, almost drowned by the clattering of our bootsoles, I heard it.

'What is it?' Grifen asked, seeing me tilt my head in an attempt to isolate the elusive echo.

'They're coming,' I said. 'Behind us.'

No sooner were the words out of my mouth than an agonised scream echoed down the corridor. Our point woman was down, a massive hole chewed through her torso by a fleshborer shot. As she flailed on the grubby rockcrete, innumerable tiny parasites continued to writhe inside the hideous wound, enlarging it, and burrowing ever deeper in an attempt to feed on the luckless squaddie's vital organs.

'And ahead,' Magot said, pausing only to grant the Emperor's peace<sup>67</sup> to her unfortunate subordinate, who was clearly beyond all hope of medical aid.

'How did they get ahead of us?' I asked, opening fire on the small knot of 'gaunts which had appeared round a bend in the corridor. Then my own question was answered by the sight of an air vent further down the corridor, its metal mesh cover ripped and shredded by powerful claws. If they'd got into the utility conduits they could be anywhere.

A storm of lasgun fire followed my lead, reaping bloody revenge for our loss. The leading tyrannid lost its weapon and a large chunk of its carapace to Jurgen's melta, but the survivors regrouped almost at once, bolstered by another group of new arrivals. I glanced back down the corridor behind us, seeing a flicker of movement in the distance, which could only be the main bulk of the swarm in hot pursuit.

'We're blocked in,' I told Grifen, hoping I didn't sound as panicky as I felt. 'We need another way out.'

Spotting a door in the wall a couple of metres away I flung it open, finding a small workshop behind it, which, judging by the scattering of tools, lubricants and lumps of flesh floating in jars of some foul-smelling liquid, had probably been used for the repair and maintenance of servitors.

As refuges went, it wasn't much, but everyone piled in after me gratefully enough, and began to barricade the door. A final glance before we slammed it was enough to underline the seriousness of our predicament: the 'nids were closing in for the kill from both directions, blocking the corridor ahead and behind. Attempting to force our way through either group would be

suicidal. Jurgen glanced up from the data-slate I'd given him to hold what felt like a lifetime ago. 'The nearest parallel corridor's that way, sir.' He indicated the direction with a grubby thumb. 'Through eight metres of rock.'

'Never an ambull around when you need one,' Drere remarked, the feeble jest raising flickering smiles from those of us who'd encountered the creatures on Simia Orichalcae, and remembered their remarkable tunnelling ability.

'I'd settle for a flamer or two,' Magot said.

'Well, we've got what we've got,' I replied, looking around the workshop for anything which looked potentially combustible, explosive, or at least sharp, and finding little of any immediate apparent value. Most of the tools looked as though they'd be equally at home in a medicae facility, and I was loath to try activating any of the pieces of equipment racked around the walls; the machine-spirits residing in them might wake up as cranky as I generally did, and there was no telling what they were supposed to do anyway. 'Let's get that bench wedged against the door.'

We manhandled it into position, finding it reassuringly heavy, and not before time; almost as soon as we got it into position, the scrabbling of talons against the thin sheet of metal started echoing round the room. Genestealers would have torn through it like Jurgen with a sandwich wrapping, but, fortunately for us, the scything claws of the 'gaunts were meant for close combat and little else.

'That won't hold them for long,' Grifen said, ripping the power cable from one of the strange devices and jamming the bare ends against the metal door. There was a fizzle of sparks, an eerie ululation from the corridor, then the lights went out. After a moment's silence the scrabbling began again, its enthusiasm undiminished.

'Worth a try,' I said encouragingly, as everyone except Jurgen and I snapped on their luminators and began attaching their bayonets to the barrels of their lasguns. A moment later the lights flickered back on, a little dimmer than before, the presiding machine-spirit of the complex apparently continuing to take an interest in our welfare after all. 'How close are we to the surface?'

'Pretty close,' Jurgen told me, after a moment's hesitation while he worked it out. He pointed at the ceiling. 'I think we must be under one of the shuttle refuelling points.'

‘Let me see that,’ I said, taking the slate. If I was reading it correctly, the pump control chamber was only a ceiling’s thickness above our heads. Using the melta so close to a fuel tank the size of a swimming pool would be an insane risk, but if we stayed where we were we’d be vaporised anyway; the only moot question was whether we’d end up as tyranid indigestion first. I pointed upwards at the whitewashed ceiling. ‘If you wouldn’t mind?’

‘Of course not, sir,’ my aide replied, aiming the melta upwards and pulling the trigger, while the rest of our party took cover beneath the workbenches. The actinic glare I’d become so familiar with since he’d acquired his favourite toy punched through my tightly closed eyelids, the backwash of heat singed the hair in my nostrils, and charred debris clattered and pinged off the gleaming metal surfaces above our heads. ‘Almost there.’ He fired again, then coughed, in evident satisfaction. ‘That ought to do it.’

‘Indeed it should,’ I agreed, looking up at the hole above our heads. The edges were still almost molten, but cooling fast, hastened by a blast of frigid air which could only be coming from the surface. The Valhallans looked at one another, visibly cheered by the chill, then turned to the door as something large and heavy rammed into it from the other side. The workbench quivered. ‘Time we were leaving, I think.’

Despite the cooling effect of the breeze from the surface, the edges of the hole were almost too hot to touch, but that was the least of my worries. If we didn’t move fast, we were going to get a great deal hotter before long, and no one hesitated before jumping off from the much-abused benches, trusting to our gloves and heavy greatcoats to keep us from burning as we swarmed up through the hole.

We found ourselves in a high-ceilinged chamber, most of which was taken up with a peculiar assemblage of piping, connected to a hose the thickness of my arm, which disappeared through a hole in the opposite wall. The whole contraption was mounted on a hydraulic platform, clearly intended to raise it to the level of the surface.

After a moment I identified a faint whining sound as the engines of our Valkyrie, muffled by the layer of rockcrete still sealing us in, and exhaled with relief; the pilot, it seemed, had been as good as his word.

‘Target the main entrance,’ I voxed him, nightmare visions of being outflanked by the ’nids again rising up to plague me, ‘and take out anything that moves.’



‘Sir?’ The pilot sounded confused, and I couldn’t say I blamed him. ‘Won’t that put you and your squad in the firing line?’

‘We’re leaving another way,’ I told him, clambering onto the platform. A small control lectern stood near the welded metal steps, and I studied the controls as Jurgen and the others scrambled up behind me, crowding the narrow operating station far more than its builders had ever envisaged. Its most prominent feature was a large red button, so I prodded it hopefully.

For a moment nothing seemed to happen, then, with a loud *clunk!*, a narrow band of daylight appeared above our heads, followed almost at once by a pattering of disturbed snow cover falling through the gap. As it continued to widen, the wind reached in to claw through my coat, and even a few of the Valhallans refastened theirs.

‘We’re rising!’ Drere shouted as the platform beneath our feet shuddered into motion and began cranking itself up towards the surface.

‘And not before time,’ I added, spotting a flicker of movement through the still-steaming hole in the floor. The ’nids had finally succeeded in forcing the door of the workshop; a moment later the first termagant scrambled up through it, raising its fleshborer as it came. Before it could fire, a volley of lasgun rounds tore it to pieces, but within seconds the riddled corpse had been shoved aside by another, and another after that as the newcomer met the same fate.

Before the third could fire, the rising platform reached the surface, sealing our pursuers into a rockcrete tomb their weapons could never penetrate.

A flurry of snowflakes battered into my face, driven with even more force than usual by the backwash from the engines of the Valkyrie hovering just above the pad. I sprinted for its boarding ramp, my eyes narrowed against the blizzard, which seemed to be blowing with undiminished enthusiasm.

‘I’ve got movement by the bunker,’ the pilot voxed, and I turned to look, a sudden flare of panic urging me to even greater speed. A swarm of close combat organisms was boiling from the entrance, their distinctive long, curved claws marking them out as hormagaunts, and I cursed my earlier decision to leave it open for a quick evacuation; although, to be fair, I could hardly have foreseen the situation we now found ourselves in. I cracked off a couple of laspistol shots, although if I actually hit any of the fast-moving targets through the obscuring snow at such extreme range I have no idea, trying to gauge if they’d reach the hovering Valkyrie before we did. So far as I could tell, it looked like being a dead heat: which would still be bad

news for us, as we'd never be able to scramble aboard if we were too busy fighting for our lives.

Then the pilot vectored his jets, scooting straight backwards, the open ramp raising a constellation of sparks as it skittered towards us across the pad.

'In!' I yelled, leaping aboard just before the thick metal plate ploughed through my ankles. The forward-mounted multi-laser triggered, scything through the onrushing 'nids with a sound like the sky being ripped in two, and I found myself gaping in astonishment at the pilot's audacity. 'Nice flying.'

'Needed to open the range a bit,' he responded. 'Everyone aboard?'

'All accounted for,' Grifen assured me, and I smacked the closing mechanism with the butt of my chainsword, reluctant to let go of either of the weapons I held until I was convinced we were safe.

'Go!' I told the pilot, and was immediately obliged to grab hold of the nearest stanchion<sup>68</sup> to prevent myself from being pitched straight back out of the closing hatch, as he put the nose up and kicked the main engines to maximum thrust.

With the aid of Jurgen's outstretched hand, I hauled myself over to the nearest viewport, looking down at the rapidly shrinking huddle of buildings below. I strained my eyes for any further signs of the swarm, but if there was any movement on the surface other than the wind-blown snow, the blizzard obscured it.

Abruptly, without warning, the aircraft shook, buffeted by a shockwave which threatened to tear it from the sky. A dense column of smoke and ash burst from where the Mechanicus shrine had stood an instant before, to be followed almost at once by a geyser of bright orange magma, its vivid colour even more shocking against the monochrome landscape. We lurched, our engine faltering as the dust from the explosion was sucked into the turbines, then began to claw our way back into the sky as the pilot brought us round upwind of the livid wound in the planet's crust.

I breathed a sigh of relief, and settled into my seat as our course steadied. The presence of the tyranids had been an unpleasant surprise, to say the least, but no doubt we'd get to the bottom of their sudden appearance soon enough. And, in the meantime, there were still the orks to be taken care of.

'Commissar,' Kasteen said, her voice unexpectedly cutting into my comm-bead. 'Can you confirm a tyranid infestation at objective two?'

‘We can,’ I said. ‘Termagants and hormagaunts for certain; if there were any other bioforms present we didn’t encounter them.’ I took another look at the ash plume, diminishing in the distance. ‘Luckily there only seemed to be a small nest, and the explosion should have taken care of them nicely.’

‘I wouldn’t count on that,’ Kasteen said, her voice grim. ‘We’ve lost contact with Commissar Forres and the platoon she took in with her at objective one.’

‘Are Lustig’s people inbound yet?’ I asked, remembering the contingency plans we’d discussed before I’d set out on this unexpectedly perilous reconnaissance sweep.

‘They are,’ Kasteen said, ‘but you’re closer, and if objective one’s infested as well...’

‘They’ll need all the recon data we can give them,’ I agreed. Even though I was outside the chain of command, she could still ask for my assistance, and I was in no position to refuse it: my standing with the common troopers would be cut off at the knees if I let an entire platoon walk into the maw of a tyrannid swarm blind. I sighed, and tried not to grit my teeth. ‘Diverting to assist,’ I told her. ‘Vox the coordinates to the pilot.’



*Editorial Note:*

*Meanwhile, the campaign against the orks continued. As Cain rather loses sight of this, a failing for which, under the circumstances, he can hardly be blamed, the following, mercifully brief, extract is appended in the interests of presenting a slightly more rounded picture.*

From *Like a Phoenix on the Wing: the Early Campaigns and Glorious Victories of the Valhallan 597th* by General Jenit Sulla (retired), 101.M42.

Their full might unleashed against the greenskin foe, the daughters and sons of Valhalla fell on the barbaric interlopers like the wrath of the Emperor incarnate, hewing their way to victory like the true heroes they were. First Company were, I'm proud to say, at the forefront of the campaign, striking the greenskins hard, and harrying their inevitable retreat, until they'd been driven back to the foothills in a series of hard-fought engagements which brought our forces to the brink of ultimate victory.

Indeed, at the time, I thought we must truly have been blessed by the hand of Him on Earth, as our advance proceeded at a pace far beyond the most wildly optimistic forecast. Divine intervention appeared to be the only rational explanation for our success, and the manner in which the enemy seemed to melt away in front of us, notwithstanding the undoubted martial prowess of all those fortunate enough to have been called to the ranks of the 597th; chief amongst them, of course, Colonel Kasteen, a tactician without peer, and whose early lessons were far from lost on my younger self. Indeed, I may go so far as to say that the successful defence of Diogenes

Gap<sup>69</sup> was only made possible by the diligent application of the principles I observed her apply on innumerable occasions.

If credit for our victories in the Nusquan campaign belongs to anyone, however, it must surely be Commissar Cain, whose inspirational leadership and unfailing dedication to the path of duty did so much to bolster the resolve of all. Though more pressing matters kept him from the front line for much of our campaign, I for one continued to let the simple question ‘What would the commissar do now?’<sup>70</sup> guide my actions at every point I felt the burden of command beginning to weigh heavily upon me, and on every occasion the path of duty became instantly clear.

It was while I was in my command Chimera, studying the maps of the foothills, and charting the route of our planned advance to minimise the risk of attack from ambush, that the order came to hold our positions. Commissar Cain had typically reserved the most hazardous assignment for himself, and while leading a recon team into the heart of an enemy-held area, discovered a threat beside which the surviving greenskins seemed but a minor irritation. Inspired by his selfless heroism, I too prepared to meet a new and terrifying foe, my faltering resolve bolstered as always by his shining and inspirational example.



## FOURTEEN

In view of what we'd discovered at the power plant, you can be sure that the prospect of facing another tyranid swarm so soon (or, to be honest, ever again) was far from welcome. 'How certain are we that the 'nids are responsible this time?' I asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

A hope Kasteen dashed almost at once. 'We can't be sure of anything,' she told me, her voice attenuated by the comm-bead's tiny vox-receiver, and the muffled roar of the Valkyrie's engine. 'Forres and the Nusquans went in, and split up to search the caverns by squad. We picked up a bit of vox traffic at first, all routine, then someone reported a contact and everything went dead.'

'It could still be the orks,' I said, not really believing it myself. 'The chances of two nests of tyranids going undetected for years must be vanishingly small.'

'True,' Kasteen said. 'But given the sudden loss of contact, and their distance from the greenskins' lines, my money's on the 'nids again.'

A cold hand seemed to take hold of my bowels, and squeeze slowly. 'If there are two nests,' I said, reluctant to verbalise the thought, 'there could be more.'

'So we need as much information as we can get,' Kasteen added. 'Movement, numbers, types of organism. It could just be an isolated outbreak, but if it isn't, Throne help us all.'

'I'll keep my eyes open,' I promised, not bothering to add 'and run like frak if I see anything', as that wouldn't exactly be helpful under the

circumstances. ‘Maybe there’s a hive ship somewhere in system, licking its wounds after the battle for Periremunda.’ Several of the living starships had fled, grievously wounded, as the Imperial Navy broke the siege of that beleaguered world, and it was possible one such survivor had drifted into the orbit of Nusquam Fundumentibus<sup>71</sup> undetected. I couldn’t think of any other explanation for the presence of so many ‘gaunts, instead of the scout organisms which usually made up the vanguard of a tyranid invasion.

‘Objective in sight,’ the pilot voxed, cutting into my anxious speculation not a moment too soon.

‘Good,’ I replied, trying to sound as if I meant it. I switched frequencies. ‘Lustig, where are you?’

‘On final approach,’ the platoon leader assured me. ‘About twenty minutes behind you. If this head wind doesn’t ease off.’

‘We’ll be waiting,’ I assured him. Twenty minutes would be a long time if the worst happened and we needed reinforcing in a hurry, but it could be worse. At least that’s what I thought at the time: in the event, it turned out to be worse than I could possibly have imagined.

As we circled the objective, I must confess to a strong sense of *deja vu*, not unmingled with apprehension. We seemed to be repeating the sequence of events which had preceded our ill-starred investigation of the power plant, and I couldn’t shake a formless feeling of dread that this time we wouldn’t be so lucky. The only positive thing that I could see was that the snowfall had eased again, so I was able to make out our destination in a fair amount of detail.

Like the power plant, there were a number of low structures studding the snow-shrouded surface, affording sheltered access to the caverns beneath; but in this case, instead of clustering together, they were widely separated, spread out across an area roughly a kilometre across. Wanting to know as much as possible about the environment I’d be entering in a few moments time I’d requested a map of the cave system, which Kasteen had transmitted to my data-slate, and after studying it for a minute or two my knack for remaining orientated in complex tunnel systems kicked in as reliably as ever, leaving me sure I’d be able to find my way around with little difficulty. Now, looking down, I was able to match each surface feature to the underground passageway or cavern connected to it with complete confidence.

‘Where are their Chimeras?’ Jurgen asked, his curiosity giving me the full benefit of his halitosis as he leaned towards the viewport for a better look.

‘They must have taken them inside,’ I said. Several of the blockhouses on the surface were designed to admit the heavy cargo crawlers<sup>72</sup> which carried the foodstuffs grown here to Primadelving and the other nearby settlements, so getting the much smaller Chimeras under cover would have presented little difficulty. ‘Keep the engines from freezing in the cold.’

Jurgen nodded. ‘You’d want them to start again quick if you needed ’em,’ he agreed. ‘Especially if the shooting started.’ The Nusquan Chimeras were fitted with multi-lasers in their turrets, rather than the heavy bolters favoured by the Valhallans, and their powercells would swiftly become depleted without the engines running to recharge them.

‘Well, we’ll soon know,’ I said as the pilot began his descent.

‘Same orders as last time?’ he asked as we hovered over the flat roof of one of the blockhouses, which we’d selected as a landing point in the absence of any purpose-built shuttle pad.

‘Almost,’ I replied. ‘Keep circling, and report any sign of movement. There are supposed to be fifty or so Nusquans around<sup>73</sup>, so don’t shoot unless you’re sure they’re ’nids or greenskins.’

‘Will do,’ the pilot confirmed. ‘Multi-laser only.’

‘Or the Hellstrikes, if you feel they’re warranted,’ I said. ‘I doubt the crops are going to explode.’

‘Unless they’re growing those pod things Sergeant Penlan tripped over on Seigal,’ Jurgen added. ‘Took days to get the last of the goo out.’ He shuddered at the memory, or another spasm of airsickness, it was hard to be sure which.

‘The demiurg got the worst of it,’ I reminded him. ‘They’d have overrun us if they hadn’t got mired in the stuff.’

‘Can’t see it slowing the ’nids down,’ my aide said, shaking his head.

‘Neither can I,’ I agreed, wondering, not for the first time, how conversations with Jurgen tended to become quite so tangential to the original topic.

‘Nothing moving on the auspex,’ the pilot told us, although that was only of limited reassurance where tyranids were concerned, their ability to evade detection almost second to none. ‘No visible signs of life either.’

‘Then let’s get to it,’ I said, unable to think of any reason to delay further, despite my best efforts. ‘Any vox traffic?’ Which was a pretty pointless



question really, as if the crew had detected any they would certainly have mentioned the fact by now.

‘None, sir,’ the navigator confirmed<sup>74</sup>, speaking directly to me for the first time. ‘Still scanning on all frequencies.’

‘They could be too deep to get a signal out,’ Grifen suggested, clearly no more convinced of that than I was. The vox gear in the command Chimera should be able to punch a signal through the intervening rock with no difficulty at all, allowing us to monitor the comm-beads of everyone in the cavern complex.

‘Maybe,’ I said, not wanting to consider the alternatives too closely. Before I could say anything else the Valkyrie lurched, its landing skids hitting the rockcrete of the roof, and came to rest a comfortable distance from the vertiginous drop to the snow below. We’d chosen the largest and most central of the blocky structures to set down on, not least because of the extra margin for error the scrumball pitch-sized area allowed the pilot, and because according to the data provided by Kasteen there was an access hatch to the building, which would allow us ingress with a minimum of difficulty.

I was also fairly sure that this would have been the entrance to the agricaves the Nusquans would have chosen, as they could have fanned out from here most efficiently, and if we followed in their footsteps we were most likely to find out what happened to them; preferably in time to avoid sharing their fate. At least if there were tyrannids here we’d know what to expect: the Nusquans would have gone in as blissfully ignorant of the true threat as we had at the Mechanicus shrine, and, lacking our experience of fighting the ’nids, they’d have had no idea of how to prevail against them.

Once again the somewhat battered boarding ramp clanged outwards, allowing full access to the razor-edged wind, which howled across the bleak wilderness surrounding us. This time we disembarked more slowly, partly because we had no fear of being shot at, and partly, in my case at least, because none of us were keen to encounter whatever flesh-sculpted horrors might be lying in wait beneath our feet. I shielded my eyes as the Valkyrie took to the skies again, and began to circle the point at which we stood, feeling as reassured as possible under the circumstances.

‘We’re down,’ I reported, as Magot’s team crunched across the snow which lay beyond the roughly circular zone cleared by the Valkyrie’s landing jets. After a short search of the roof they unfolded their trenching

tools, and began scraping the area around the trapdoor free of the ice and snow hiding it from view. 'Second wave ETA?'

'Still twenty minutes, commissar,' Lustig voxed almost at once.

'We're proceeding inside,' I told him. 'If you follow the same route, you should catch up with us soon enough.' At least I hoped so. If the entire cave system was indeed riddled with tyranids, I'd need a lot more troopers to hide behind than a single squad, already depleted to almost three quarters of its original strength.

By the time I'd finished speaking, the troopers under Magot's command had managed to lever the heavy metal slab open, no mean feat considering how firmly it had been frozen in place, and a telling testament to how at home the Valhallans were in this hideous environment. Despite the reservations I might normally have had about moving into harm's way, I was down the ladder after our vanguard with almost indecent haste, my eagerness to get out of the bone-biting cold no doubt being misinterpreted as impatience to enter the fray by those around me.

The ladder descended to a narrow catwalk, some two and a half metres below the ceiling, apparently for the convenience of those artisans charged with the maintenance of the luminators; which left sufficient headroom to walk upright, although doing so encumbered with our weapons and equipment over a drop of ten metres or more was somewhat disturbing. The net result, in my case at least, was a curious combination of vertigo and claustrophobia, all the more unsettling for experiencing either so seldom<sup>75</sup>. Fortunately the catwalk terminated in a wider platform, from which a rickety staircase descended, affording us a clear look at the floor of the warehouse as we made our way down.

'We've found the Chimeras,' I voxed. 'Three of them, anyway.' The vehicles were parked close together, near the middle of the huge structure, the rest of the space it enclosed empty and echoing.

'The others must have gone to different entrances,' Grifen said, 'to sweep the tunnels from the other end.'

'More than likely,' I agreed. It was a tactic which would have worked well against the orks the Nusquans expected to find here, trapping them between squads advancing from both directions, and cutting off their lines of escape. It was fatally flawed against tyranids, though, simply allowing the swarm to pick off the intruders piecemeal, instead of being able to combine their firepower against it.

‘Something’s not right,’ Jurgen said, as our bootsoles hit the rockcrete, and we glanced round orientating ourselves. His voice echoed in the wide, high space, unimpeded by anything other than the ominous metal shapes of the abandoned Chimeras. ‘Where’s all the food waiting to be loaded?’

A good question. A line of empty pallets stood against one wall, their contents gone.

‘Maybe the crawler just left,’ Vorhees suggested, ‘and they haven’t started stacking the next load up yet.’

‘Not according to this.’ Grifen bent to pick up an abandoned data-slate, which had drawn her attention to itself by skittering across the floor in response to an accidental nudge from her boot. ‘Crawler’s not due for another three days.’

I glanced at the manifest still displayed on the cracked and flickering screen. According to that, there should have been about two hundred tonnes of miscellaneous foodstuffs stacked up around us, awaiting dispatch to various destinations. The implications were disturbing, to say the least, although not as much as the smear of blood still visible on the keypad of the device.

‘The ’nids must have eaten it all,’ Jurgen said, no mean trencherman himself, and clearly impressed. I tried to picture a swarm large enough to consume two hundred tonnes of food, and immediately wished I hadn’t; it would be orders of magnitude larger than the one we’d already faced and escaped today.

‘The food stores in the warehouse have been cleaned out,’ I voxed for Kasteen’s benefit, before adding ‘so move carefully. There must be hundreds of organisms around here,’ to the troopers around me.

‘Let’s check out the Chimeras,’ Grifen said, beginning to walk towards them.

‘Pity the command one isn’t here,’ I agreed, falling in at her shoulder. ‘We’d be able to read everyone’s positions on the auspex.’ As we moved closer to the abandoned vehicles, it became increasingly obvious that something wasn’t right. The thick armour plate was rent in several places, ripped apart by powerful claws, and Jurgen and I shared a look of grim understanding as we got our first clear view of the damage.

‘Genestealers, you reckon?’ he asked, and I nodded, the picture of their powerful talons tearing through the Reclaimers’ Terminator armour aboard the *Spawn of Damnation* all too vivid in my mind’s eye.

‘Too precise for one of the big ones,’ I agreed; the hulking monstrosities would have crushed and dented the hulls, tearing their way inside with far less finesse. As I studied the damage to the trio of vehicles more carefully my eye fell on the unit markings of the nearest, half obscured by a slash of parallel talon marks. ‘That can’t be right.’

‘What can’t?’ Grifen asked, then her eyes narrowed as she made out the almost obliterated identification code. ‘That’s the command vehicle. But where are the vox and auspex antennae?’ They should have been obvious and distinctive, marking it out instantly to the naked eye.

‘Sheared off,’ Drere reported, from the top of the crippled Chimera. She picked up a tangle of metal and threw it down for my inspection, raising a clangor of echoes in the vast space as it hit the rockcrete floor. A look of consternation crossed her face, as it dawned on all of us simultaneously that if there were any tyranids in the immediate vicinity she’d just announced our presence to them in no uncertain manner, and everyone tensed, readying their weapons; but, after an agonising wait of a minute or two, no tide of chitin came scurrying out of the depths to challenge us, and the tension began to ease.

‘Sliced through cleanly,’ I said, somewhat reassured by the failure of the ’nids to slaughter us all instantly where we stood, and returning my attention to the ravaged vox array. The edge was straight, the metal bright, and faint indentations further up the strut betrayed where the ’stealer responsible had gripped it with a couple of its other limbs to steady the assembly before hacking through it. ‘They took out the comms on purpose.’ The reason for which was obvious; with the relay in the command vehicle down, the comm-beads carried by the Nusquans would be blocked by the layers of rock between the caverns, isolating the squads from one another, and making it impossible to coordinate them.

Reminded, if I ever needed to be, that the hive mind was at least as cunning and capable of subtlety in its tactics as any other foe the Imperium faced, although it was all too easy to forget this when faced by the endless sea of bestial creatures it controlled, I looked at the solemn faces surrounding me. If Drere’s moment of carelessness had indeed attracted its attention, our only chance of survival was to be somewhere else when the genestealers returned; and hope our reinforcements arrived before they caught up with us.

‘No signs of life,’ Drere reported, after a cursory look through the top

hatch of the ravaged Chimera. She grinned mirthlessly. 'Big surprise there.'

'The others are empty too,' Magot reported, trotting back from investigating them with a couple of her troopers. 'Unless you count a lot of bloodstains.'

'Then let's get moving,' I said. Well-lit ramps led off from each edge of the chamber, disappearing into the depths below, and I picked the nearest more or less at random. There was no telling which one Forres and her people had taken, so one tunnel was as good as another so far as I could see.

'Move out,' Grifen said, as happy to follow my lead as anyone would be under the circumstances, which was not a lot, and we set off.

To my initial surprise, my overriding impression as we made our way through the cavern system was one of space, although I suppose that shouldn't have been all that unexpected, given the purpose to which it had been put. The tunnel we took was wide and high, about four metres by three, and well-lit; the reason for which became obvious soon enough.

'Is that a truck?' Jurgen asked, in tones of surprise which quite accurately reflected my own.

'More or less,' I agreed. It would have looked pretty much at home on the city streets of any world with a more equitable climate, although the open cab would have been inconvenient when it rained. It had crashed into the tunnel wall, crumpling the bodywork and breaking an axle, which was a shame; commandeering the thing would have moved us all a lot faster. 'It must have been ferrying food up to the loading area.'

'Till the 'nids decided to eat here,' Vorhees added, with a grimace at the rust-coloured stains disfiguring the ripped-up driving seat.

I nodded thoughtfully. The driver had clearly been fleeing the swarm, losing control as it overwhelmed him; the suddenness and ferocity of the attack could have left no more eloquent a testimony. 'Stay sharp,' I admonished, quite unnecessarily I'm sure.

'I've got all the sharp I need,' Magot said, running a thumb along the edge of her bayonet.

'Let's hope you don't need,' I rejoined, eliciting grim smiles from most of the troopers around me.

Though we found plenty of traces of the tyranids' passing as we penetrated deeper into the cavern system, the creatures themselves remained worryingly elusive. Shortly after stumbling across the abandoned truck, we

found ourselves entering the first of the agricultural caverns, a cathedral-sized space still displaying the cracked and fissured walls of a natural rock formation. The floor had been smoothed, however, and powerful luminators mounted on pylons spaced at regular intervals around it; finding my boots splashing in a thin film of water, I resolved to give them as wide a berth as possible, since a loose cable on any of them would turn the shallow pool into an instant deathtrap.

There was no question of where the water was coming from; the whole cavern was filled with metal troughs, mounted on stanchions driven into the floor, and which had at one time no doubt contained it. Now they were bent and shattered, their contents spilling all over the cave.

‘Hydroponics,’ Kasteen explained, as I reported what I’d seen for the benefit of the approaching platoon, and the analysts back in Primadelving. ‘We grow most of our food like that on Valhalla too<sup>76</sup>.’

‘No sign of any plants,’ I said, my apprehension growing as the realisation sunk in of what that meant. I had no idea how much vegetation the cavern had contained yesterday, but if all these troughs had been full, it was a huge amount, and my already pessimistic estimate of the size of the swarm we were facing increased by another order of magnitude. If all the other caverns had been stripped too...

‘Only one way to find out,’ Grifen said when I verbalised the thought, and I nodded reluctant agreement.

My knack of remaining orientated in an underground environment proving as reliable as ever, we moved on, down another of the wide tunnels to the next cavern. This was considerably deeper, the subterranean road connecting them descending in a wide spiral, so that the open space was hidden from us until we were almost on top of it.

‘At least our feet are dry,’ Jurgen said, moving his head slowly as he scanned the open space in search of a target.

I nodded, taking in the panorama of ripped and shattered animal pens. I had no idea what manner of creature had been reared down here, but I was in no doubt of what had happened to them, butchered along with their keepers to feed the insatiable hunger of the hive mind. Even the dung had gone, the ’nids being fastidious when it came to garnering raw material for the creation of more of their kind.

‘The animal pens in cavern twelve are empty,’ I reported, hearing only the faint hiss of static in my earpiece by way of reply. Our rapid descent down

the spiral way had evidently taken us too deep for our comm-beads to remain connected to the vox-unit of the Valkyrie<sup>77</sup>, and I felt a brief surge of panic, which I fought down briskly. The important thing was to return to the higher levels as quickly as possible, where we could re-establish contact and join up with Lustig's platoon.

For a moment I debated going back the way we'd come, but as we'd fanned out across the open space we'd moved a fair way from the tunnel mouth we'd entered the cave by, and another pair in the far wall were almost as close. One led up upwards, I was sure, looping round through a couple of other nexus points, to bring us back to the entrance building we'd started from by another of the tunnel mouths leading off from it. Doing so would complete our recon sweep in a manner comprehensive enough to look as though we'd done our duty, and enable us to join up with Lustig's command squad, which I had no doubt a soldier of his experience would leave where it was least likely to make contact with the enemy. (Something Lustig was never averse to personally, but I knew he took his new-found responsibilities seriously enough not to risk compromising his ability to coordinate the squads under his command by having to fight off hordes of 'gaunts at the same time.) No doubt Forres had developed the same idea, parking the Chimeras well behind where she expected the battle lines to be: but unlike her we knew what we were up against, and, more importantly, how to fight it.

'This way,' I said, angling towards the tunnel mouth leading upwards.

Magot glanced down the other, the gently inclined floor of which led even further into the bowels of the planet, and wrinkled her nose. 'There's that smell again,' she said.

Turning my head in her direction, I was able to catch a faint whiff of sulphur on the air currents wafting up from the cavern below. 'This place connects to the volcanic vents too,' I explained, as though I hadn't just learned that myself from the information Kasteen had supplied. 'They use the heat to warm the place and help the plants grow.'

'Should we check it out before we head back up?' she asked, and I shook my head, trying to seem casual about it.

'Better get back into contact as soon as we can,' I said, all too aware that if the 'nids followed the same pattern of instinctive behaviour as the ones at the power plant they'd be congregating in the lowest point of the cave system, and that our chances of survival if we disturbed a swarm as big as

the one I'd inferred could be there would start at non-existent before growing rapidly worse.

'You won't hear any argument from me,' Grifen agreed, taking the path that led upwards, and we began our ascent as circumspectly as we'd descended, despite the urge to hurry that nagged at us with every footfall. I've often observed that fatal mistakes get made more often on the return leg of a recon mission than the outward one, no doubt because the simple fact of turning back creates the false impression that the worst is over; whereas the enemy is still as alert as ever. Most of the troopers with me were far too experienced in the ways of war to succumb to that fallacy, however, and we remained fully focused, a fact which was to save our lives before many more minutes were over.

We'd almost reached the next cavern when I became aware that the faint wash of static in my comm-bead was modulating slightly, and before I'd taken many more paces the vague fragments of sound began to coalesce into voices. I still couldn't make much sense of it, but I'd been in enough tight corners over the years to recognise the clipped urgency of orders being given and received in the middle of a pitched battle.

'What is it, sir?' Jurgen asked, raising his melta, attuned to my moods by our long years of campaigning together. Picking up their cue from him, Grifen and Magot looked expectantly in my direction.

'Sounds like Lustig's arrived,' I said grimly, 'and the 'nids have laid on a welcoming party.'

No sooner had the words left my mouth, however, than the voice of the lieutenant himself sounded clearly in my earpiece.

'Commissar, do you read?' Lustig asked, sounding remarkably calm for a man I'd presumed to be fighting for his life.

'Cain, go ahead,' I said, my surprise no doubt evident in my tone. 'What's your status?'

'Just disembarked,' Lustig said, sounding equally surprised, 'and securing our perimeter. You think 'stealers took out the Chimeras in here?'

'Positive,' I said, stopping abruptly. We'd almost reached the entrance to the next cavern, but I was damned if I was going to take another step. 'Because I'm looking right at them.'





## FIFTEEN

My companions followed my lead, freezing in place instinctively, as the sinister shadows bounded across the cavern in front of us; there must have been a dozen at least, although under the circumstances I didn't feel particularly disposed to making an accurate head count. Long, lolling tongues curled from their fang-filled mouths, while sinister highlights flickered from the talons tipping the hands on each of their four arms. For a heart-stopping moment I thought they'd seen us, but fortunately their attention appeared to be elsewhere; in an instant, it seemed, they'd crossed the flooded floor of a hydroponic chamber in no better condition than the first we'd found, their taloned feet kicking up a mist of spray from the thin film of water, to vanish down another of the connecting tunnels.

'That was lucky,' Jurgen said, as though we'd just avoided nothing worse than a rain shower. 'Another minute and we'd have run right into them.'

'We would,' I agreed, hoping my voice wasn't as shaky as the rest of me. The tunnel they'd come from was the very one I'd been intending to take back to the chamber we'd arrived in. Which reminded me... 'Lustig. The 'stealers were in the passage between your position and chamber nine on the schematic. It's probably clear now, but advance with caution.'

'Acknowledged,' Lustig said, sounding even more surprised than before. 'Where did they go?'

'The exit for chamber sixteen,' Grifen said, consulting her own slate<sup>78</sup> with a frown of puzzlement. 'And fast. Maybe you spooked them.'

I shook my head. 'Genestealers don't panic. Not like that. They were

running towards something, not away.’ The faint echoes I’d noticed before were still in my comm-bead, and the realisation suddenly dawned. If it wasn’t Lustig’s platoon under siege, then... ‘It must be the Nusquans. The hive mind’s calling in reinforcements.’

‘Say again, sir?’ Lustig requested, evidently still too distant to hear the faint vox traffic for himself.

I gritted my teeth, already well aware of where this conversation was bound to lead. ‘We’re picking up faint vox signals,’ I said, ‘on Guard frequencies. If it isn’t you, it has to be the Nusquans, what’s left of them. They must be holed up in sixteen, or whatever’s beyond it.’ Even as I spoke, my ever-reliable mental map filled in the answer; another exit to the surface. Presumably they were trying to fight their way through to their remaining Chimeras.

‘Squads two, three and five are on their way to assist,’ Lustig said, effectively sinking any hope I had of palming a heroic rescue attempt off on someone else for a change. ‘Can you recce for them?’

‘We’re on it,’ Grifen said, before I had a chance to come up with a good reason to refuse, or at least wait for another thirty troopers to catch up with us.

‘Keep an eye out behind us as well,’ I cautioned, all too aware that if any more tyranid reinforcements turned up, we’d be caught between them and the main army. Our only chance of surviving the next few minutes was to avoid the notice of the hive mind altogether, which was a chancy proposition at the best of times; although I’d managed the trick on a few occasions before<sup>79</sup>, so I knew it could be done.

Though still mindful of the need for caution, we picked up our pace as we began to follow the ‘stealers, hoping that the swarm’s attention would be directed at the Nusquans it was trying to consume, rather than behind it. A risk, true, but a calculated one, and unavoidable if we were to intervene while there was still someone left to rescue.

Before long the whispers in my ear had swelled to faint voices, growing steadily stronger, and I was not at all surprised to discern Forres’s clipped and self-assured tones prominent among them. I couldn’t tell how many survivors were left standing, but damned few by this time I’d wager, and if the voices I could hear were anything to go by they’d entered that strange state of mind where the certainty of imminent death brings complete clarity and a curious absence of fear. (A sensation I’d already experienced often

enough in my own turbulent life to recognise at once.) Which is all very well in its way, the lack of any sense of self-preservation sometimes enabling desperate people to achieve extraordinary things, but if I was going to be forced to play the hero again I wanted there to be someone left to appreciate it.

‘Commissar Cain to Nusquan unit,’ I voxed, knowing that the realisation that help was on its way would infuse the beleaguered survivors with fresh purpose. ‘We’re approaching with reinforcements. I need a sitrep ASAP<sup>80</sup>.’ The last thing we needed at this stage was to blunder into the middle of a pitched battle and get annihilated before we got the chance to achieve anything.

To my complete lack of surprise, Forres answered, any astonishment she may have felt at this unexpected reprieve firmly suppressed. ‘Completely surrounded,’ she replied. ‘We’ve taken refuge on the catwalk, but they keep on coming.’

‘You got as far as the blockhouse on the surface?’ I asked, impressed by her tenacity if nothing else, the memory of the narrow walkway we’d traversed from the roof still fresh in my memory.

‘The agricave,’ Forres corrected, interrupting herself with the harsh bark of a bolt pistol, exactly the sidearm I’d have expected her to choose. Loud, ostentatious, and making a spectacular mess of its target, a lot of commissars favour them because they think they’re more intimidating<sup>81</sup>, although I’ve found the solidly reliable laspistol far better suited to service in the field. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve recharged it on the fly, when I’d have been long out of ammunition for a projectile weapon. ‘There’s a short one for maintaining the inlet pipes.’

‘We’ll spot it,’ I assured her. In truth I hadn’t noticed any such arrangement in the caverns we’d passed through before, my sole interest in the pipework above us being the absence of any lurking genestealers poised to pounce.

‘That’ll be where the ’stealers were off to in such a hurry,’ Jurgen said, never slow to point out the obvious. ‘Most tyranids can’t climb.’ Which wasn’t entirely true, but they were clumsy at best, having only their feet and middle limbs to do the job with, the weapons fused to their forelimbs only getting in the way. Genestealers, on the other hand, were perfectly adapted to swarming up near vertical surfaces, and if Forres and her people had sought refuge by climbing, the hive mind would have called in as many as it

could to drag them down.

As we got our first sight of the cavern, it was just as obvious where the Nusquans were as the junior commissar had promised. A huge, swaying pyramid of intertwined tyranids rose from the floor beneath a fragile-seeming catwalk, to which a dozen determined survivors clung grimly, pouring lasgun fire into the seething mass of flesh below. So far it was about three metres high, and growing inexorably, already well over halfway to its goal.

‘Single shots!’ Forres shouted. ‘Pick your targets!’ Suiting the action to the word, she picked off a termagant teetering near the top of the pile, which was just bringing its fleshborer up on aim, with commendable accuracy. To be conserving ammunition in straits this dire they must be almost out, an impression reinforced a moment later by one of the Nusquan troopers, who gave up pointing his gun at the horde of horrors below, and began fixing his bayonet.

‘I’m out,’ his voice crackled over the vox, confirming my deduction.

‘Look up there,’ Jurgen said, and following the direction of his grime-encrusted finger, I was able to pick out a whisper of stealthy movement among the stalactites above our heads.

‘Well spotted,’ I commended him, and activated the vox. ‘Forres, you’ve got ’stealers above you. Three groups, one, five, and nine o’clock.’

The Nusquans redirected their fire towards the new threat, and a couple of the taloned horrors fell, bursting like foul and overripe fruit as they hit the floor and the hydroponic troughs, the impact raising small fountains of water and viscera. The water frothed where they’d hit, as uncountable writhing serpentine forms swarmed to tear them apart, greedily devouring the still-twitching corpses with single-minded diligence.

‘Rippers,’ Vorhees said simply, in horror-struck tones, recognising the razor-fanged worms with a shudder of revulsion. The flooded floor was carpeted with the foul things, as far as the eye could see.

‘We’ll need flamers,’ I voxed the approaching troopers. ‘The more the better. The whole cavern’s infested.’ If we could advance behind those, and a solid barrage of lasgun fire, we might be able to force our way over to the Nusquans and get them out before the tyranids recovered the initiative. Possibly. So long as we maintained the element of surprise until we were ready.

‘We can’t target the genestealers from this angle,’ Forres told us, matter-

of-factly. 'The stalactites are in the way. You'll have to pick them off from the floor.'

'If we do that, the hive mind will know we're here,' I pointed out. 'As soon as we're ready to extract you we can...' Before I could finish the sentence the 'stealers swarmed forward, charging as quickly and easily as if they were running on solid ground; another second or two and they'd be on the swaying gantry, carving their way among the troopers like kroot through a meat locker. 'Frak it, fire!'

Our lasguns crackled, and Jurgen's melta added its sinister hiss, wreaking havoc among the brood clinging to the ceiling; more fell, riddled with lasbolts or baked by the melta, these last raising clouds of steam where they hit the floor, or crashed into the flooded troughs. Not all were killed outright by the fall: several stirred, trying to rise, while one in particular pulled itself to its feet with a grasping hand on one of the troughs, despite the loss of a limb and a deep crack in its carapace through which some noisome fluid seeped. It turned its head slowly, seeking the source of the unexpected interference, its eyes seeming to lock on mine; then it began a lumbering charge, managing two or three halting paces in our direction before the water frothed around it, and the serpentine scavengers closed in. Like the rest of its brood it was torn apart and consumed in seconds.

'Why did they do that instead of letting it attack us?' Jurgen asked, but within a heartbeat we had our answer; all round the cavern, 'gaunts and the hulking warrior forms which gave them volition were turning, as though suddenly made aware of our presence.

'Because the rest are about to,' I said, preparing to run. We'd done our best, but there was no point in allowing ourselves to be devoured along with the Nusquans. If we were fast enough, maybe we could get behind the protection afforded by the flamers the troopers behind us were bringing up. A few gouts of burning promethium would fill the corridor, holding the hideous creatures off long enough for us to make it back to the Valkyries uneaten. I hoped. 'Valhallans, where are you?'

'Chamber nine, commissar,' Jinxie Penlan told me, her voice overlaid with the unmistakable sounds of combat. 'There's a whole swarm of them coming up from the lower levels. We're holding them off with the flamers, but we can't get through to you.'

'Just keep them off our backs for as long as you can,' I said, cursing under my breath. No retreat that way.

I glanced up at the Nusquans on their precarious perch, where a desperate struggle was going on against the two or three 'stealers which had survived our intervention: Forres was engaging one with her chainsword, and looked like getting her face bitten off, until she jammed the muzzle of her miniature bolter under its chin and pulled the trigger, while a luckless trooper at the other end of the gantry was slashed almost in two, and fell, flailing, to be torn to pieces by the waiting swarm the moment he hit the ground. We'd get no help from up there, either.

'Pick your targets,' Grifen said, sounding oddly like Forres for a moment, before adding some rather more pertinent advice, 'and aim for the large ones every chance you get'<sup>82</sup>. If we can disrupt the swarm we might have a chance.'

'If the little frakkers don't rip our toes off first,' Magot said, looking at the thrashing killer worms, her face contorted with revulsion. It was no idle comment; under the influence of the hive mind, they were abandoning the corpses and the remains of the crop which used to be here (some kind of root vegetable, judging by the few partially intact examples I could see), and were already swarming towards us, while the specialised combat forms began to untangle themselves from the ungainly circus act beneath the catwalk, and trot in our direction behind them. The leading warrior aimed its deathspitter at us, and a second later the water a metre or so in front of my boot began to bubble and hiss furiously as the ball of acid it had fired started eating its way into the cavern floor.

'Fire!' I commanded, abruptly reminded that our sole remaining advantage was the superior range of our weaponry, and that we'd almost squandered it already. 'Before it can get another one off!' The synapse creature was promptly riddled, and went down, but instead of pausing to feast on the corpse the rippers continued their remorseless advance, slithering towards us with malign intent. 'Two more over there!'

'One,' Jurgen said, nailing the left-hand one neatly with the melta, reducing the devourer it carried to a mass of charred meat, but the hideous creature rallied, and came on, clearly intent on dicing us with its scything claws instead: in the unlikely event of the screen of smaller creatures it and its companion were lurking behind leaving anything larger than mincemeat, in any case.

'Full auto, take down the ones with the guns,' Grifen ordered. 'Before they get close enough to use them.' Our erstwhile companion's gruesome death

fresh in our minds, we needed no further urging, unleashing a withering hail of fire as we retreated step by step up the tunnel, while the tide of slithering, ankle-high fangs continued to snap at our boots as we went, the bloated serpentine bodies behind them writhing over the wet footprints we left on the rockcrete floor.

At which point, belated inspiration suddenly struck, as I recalled my idle thought about the lighting pylons in the first of the flooded chambers we'd found. 'Jurgen!' I shouted. 'Can you bring down one of those luminator rigs?'

'No problem,' my aide assured me, scanning the narrowing view of the chamber in front of us, which each retreating step closed in a little further. 'Any one in particular?'

'The easiest to hit,' I said, wanting to leave as little to chance as possible. Jurgen's marksmanship may have been exceptional, but so was his ability to take whatever I said to him literally, and if I was any more specific he'd continue grimly plugging away at whichever one I'd designated even if that meant having to bring down half the swarm to get a clear shot at it.

'Right you are, sir,' he responded, as if I'd asked for nothing more troublesome than a fresh bowl of tanna, and I closed my eyes reflexively just as he pulled the trigger. 'Frak it, get out of the way! Sorry, sir, just winged that big one instead.'

He must have done more than just winged it, because the tide of squirming death at my feet checked its advance for a moment, the cohesiveness of the hive mind disrupted; then, with the inconvenient obstruction out of the way, he fired again.

As the supporting girder work flashed into incandescent vapour, the metal around it softening and buckling, the metal pylon lurched sideways, and began to sag. 'Again!' I began, but before I could complete the command, gravity overwhelmed the weakened structure and it toppled gracefully to the cavern floor.

The effect was immediate, the luminators shattering, and the thick electrical cables supplying them fizzling as they hit the water. The shallow pool began to froth, churned to foam by the agonised spasms of the countless organisms infesting it, and jagged lightning arced between the metal surfaces of the hydroponic troughs, electrocuting those tyrannids which had the luck or quick-wittedness to be out of the water just as effectively as those caught in it. The surviving warrior form staggered,

roaring and bellowing like a drunken ork, discharged its venom cannon in a final reflex (which fortunately failed to hit anything other than a couple of expiring hormagaunts), and collapsed into the boiling pool. Silence suddenly fell, broken only by the faint, sinister buzzing of the abused electrical system.

‘They’ve stopped moving,’ Magot said, prodding the nearest ripper cautiously with the tip of her bayonet. Those closest to us were too far from the water to have been electrocuted themselves, but deprived of the controlling influence of the hive mind, they’d simply become inert lumps of staggeringly ugly meat.

‘Then we’d better collect the Nusquans and get out of here,’ I said.

‘Preferably without boiling us in the process,’ Forres said, stowing her weapons, and looking down at us severely from her perch near the ceiling. ‘Which is something of a flaw in your otherwise impressive stratagem.’

‘No “thanks for saving us from being ’nid bait,” then,’ Magot muttered. ‘Snotty femhound.’

‘Corporal,’ I reproved, but to be honest I pretty much shared her opinion, so stopped short of an outright reprimand; an omission which, judging by her smirk, had not gone unnoted, nor my reasons uninferred. Besides, Forres did have a point: so long as the cable was in the water, we couldn’t re-enter the chamber, and the Nusquans couldn’t descend from their perch, without getting electrocuted just as thoroughly as the ’nids.

‘We’re being forced back here,’ Penlan voxed, just to crank the pressure up a little more. ‘We’ve laid down a flame barrier between the swarm and your tunnel mouth, but it’s only going to burn for a few minutes.’

‘Acknowledged,’ I said, acutely aware that another tidal wave of scuttling malevolence would be bearing down on us as soon as the flames died, and that the only way forward was across the electrified pool. If I didn’t think of something fast, we were going to be ’nid bait ourselves.

‘There’s a junction box on the north-west wall,’ Forres cut in, pointing at something I couldn’t quite see from her elevated perch. ‘The cable from the luminator you downed seems to be plugged into it.’

I took the proffered amplivisor from Jurgen, and focused it. She was right. Taking it out should cut the power to all the luminators in that portion of the cavern.

I turned to the troopers as my aide shrugged his bulky melta aside and unslung his lasgun, in anticipation of my next order. If anyone among us



was capable of hitting so small a mark, I was confident it would be him, but under the circumstances the sooner the power was cut the better, and we didn't have long to try. 'Double ale ration for whoever hits that box thing on the wall over there first,' I said, and stood back, ready to leave them to it.

'Allow me,' Forres interjected dryly, casually putting a bolt through the box from the swaying catwalk before anyone else could pull the trigger. The explosive bolt struck true, and detonated, ripping the target to shreds, and plunging the entire cavern into darkness, relieved only by the light leaking from the tunnel mouths on either side.

'Nice shot,' I said. 'But perhaps a slight flaw in your stratagem?'

Magot snickered quietly as we kindled our luminators again, and began sloshing through the water, picking our way as best we could through the innumerable dead horrors choking it. The larger creatures had to be dodged around, and I kept my laspistol trained on each one as I did so, particularly the warrior forms, having learned long ago that it took a great deal to kill a tyranid, and the jolt of high voltage electricity might merely have stunned some of them.

'We have to get moving,' I said as we reached the vicinity of the dangling catwalk. 'We're out of the hive mind's awareness at the moment, but it knows something's knocked a hole in its neural net, and right where it happened; it'll be sending more tyranids in after us as sure as the Emperor protects. Our only chance is to be gone by the time it does.'

'And how do you suggest we get down?' Forres asked, with a touch of asperity. 'We had to take out the ladder with a krak grenade. You'll need to get a rope from the Chimeras, bring it back, and...'

'End up in a digester pool like the rest of the poor frakwits you led in here,' I interrupted. 'When we get to the Chimeras we're firing them up and driving them out. Come along now if you don't want to get left for the 'nids.'

'They'll be here any minute,' Grifen added, with an apprehensive glance at the tunnel mouth we'd come in by.

'We can't jump from up here, we'll be killed!' one of the Nusquans objected.

'No you won't.' I swung my luminator round to spotlight the pile of tyranid corpses beneath the catwalk. It wasn't as high as it had been, but it would do. 'If you hang by your hands first, it's only a couple of metres to drop to the top of the heap, and you can climb down that fast enough.' The

chitinous exoskeletons wouldn't exactly supply a soft landing, but they'd be a lot more comfortable than a five metre fall to solid rock, that was for sure.

I expected more argument, but the Nusquans had evidently learned the lesson that a slim chance is infinitely preferable to none as well as I had by this time, and followed my suggestion without further ado. Forres watched them for a moment, then tucked her weapons away and simply jumped, her black coat flapping like a gargoyle's wings as she reached out for a hold among the mound of monstrous corpses, and swarmed her way down them talon by tusk. 'Are you always that inventive?' she asked, and I shrugged.

'Sometimes you have to be,' I said. 'The manual doesn't cover everything.' I glanced at the tunnel we'd entered by, certain I'd heard the first faint scuttling of a new horde back in the throat of it. 'Now let's get out of here, before the rest of them arrive.'

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## SIXTEEN

‘I can see them!’ Magot reported, her team having taken point as we scurried up the tunnel as fast as our legs could carry us. Grifen’s team had taken the rearguard, leaving the Nusquans in the middle, as by this point they’d expended so much ammo they had little to defend themselves with beyond withering sarcasm, which in my experience tyrannids were seldom bothered by. ‘Two Chimeras, still parked.’

Though my natural instinct was to run for the safety they represented as fast as I could, I’d dropped back a little to confer with Forres; partly because it would be expected of me, and it was vital to pass her report back in case we failed to make it out of here, but mainly because if the ’nids had managed to outflank us and were waiting in ambush I’d rather not be the first one to find out.

‘They just came at us out of nowhere,’ Forres said, her voice steady, but her eyes still numb with the shock of what she’d been through today. ‘We deployed for a sweep through the caverns, but as we’d found no sign of the greenskins on the surface we assumed they must already have withdrawn. By the time those creatures appeared, we’d got sloppy.’ Her jaw tightened. ‘I should have kept a tighter rein, kept everyone up to the mark. But I got careless too.’

‘A dozen of the troopers with you survived,’ I said, partly because I’d got so used to boosting morale over the years that an encouraging word at times like these had become almost second nature to me, and partly because our conversation was being monitored and that was the sort of thing a Hero of

the Imperium was supposed to say, instead of ‘What the frak were you thinking, strolling around a war zone like you were on leave?’ I had a reputation to consider after all, even if I didn’t deserve it. ‘Under the circumstances, I’d say that’s a pretty strong testament to your leadership. Where did they come from?’

‘Up from the lower levels,’ Forres said, looking a little happier now that I’d thrown her a bone. I could still remember my first assignment as a newly-inducted commissar, one which had also been interrupted by the sudden appearance of a tyranid horde, so I suppose I may have felt rather more sympathetic towards her than I might otherwise have done; although I doubted that her first impulse had been to head for the horizon while the going was good, like mine had been. ‘We were deep enough to smell the volcanic vents, but before we could descend any further they just started pouring out of the tunnels, and we could hear the other units screaming over the vox. Lieutenant Caromort ordered the survivors to link up with her command squad, but we couldn’t get through to join them, and the main group was wiped out. I told Sergeant Lanks to pull back and return to the Chimeras, but the swarm caught up with us before we could make it, and cut us off. I spotted the gantry under the pipework, and got everyone who was left up onto it.’

‘Which saved their lives,’ I pointed out. ‘Well done.’

‘Not well enough,’ Forres said grimly. Some people you just can’t help, and now was hardly the time to try and talk some sense into her, so I simply nodded formally, and moved up to join Magot, whose fireteam had reached the floor of the blockhouse we’d been aiming for and begun to fan out across it.

‘Doesn’t look good,’ she greeted me, with a baleful glare at the Chimeras. I can’t say I was surprised to find them in much the same condition as the ones we’d found on our arrival, but the disappointment was profound nonetheless; as so often when things looked really dire, I’d clung to the shred of hope that they might not have been quite as bad as they appeared.

I turned to look at Forres, who had moved up with the rest of the party and was staring at the wrecked vehicles as though someone had just shot her puppy. Concerned murmuring began among the Nusquans, incipient panic not far beneath the surface, and she rounded on them, her expression becoming severe and unemotional as abruptly as the flick of a switch. ‘Stay focused,’ she snapped. ‘We’re getting out of this.’ It was a good

performance, but I'd seen enough to realise she was as terrified as any of them. Me too, come to that, but I was even better at concealing how I felt than she was, having notched up many more years of practice.

'Did you know the crews were dead?' I asked quietly.

'I knew we'd lost contact,' she said, not quite answering the question. 'But I hoped we could get moving without them if necessary.'

'That's not the problem,' I said, pleased to note that Grifen and the sole surviving Nusquan NCO, Lanks I imagined, were already setting up to cover the tunnel mouth as effectively as possible with the limited resources at our disposal while we spoke. 'Jurgen and Magot can drive Chimeras.' After their own idiosyncratic fashion, admittedly, but under the circumstances I wouldn't quarrel with my aide's propensity to jam the throttle as wide open as possible, with a complete disregard for whatever else might be in the vicinity. I gestured at the ripped and battered metal in front of us. 'The problem is that these heaps of scrap aren't going anywhere, however many drivers we've got.'

'It might not be as bad as it looks,' Forres said crisply, before glancing into the driver's compartment of the nearest, the controls of which had been comprehensively mangled in the 'stealers' attempts to wrinkle out the morsels within. Her face fell. 'Oh.'

'“Oh” pretty much covers it,' I agreed, looking round at the rest of the cavernous space. It was smaller than the one we'd entered by, though not by much, and almost as empty. 'We'll have to get out through the main door, and hope our pilot can pick us up from the open ground before the 'nids get too close.' I was no keener to face the bone-chilling cold of the surface than I'd been before, but given the alternative it seemed positively inviting. Unfortunately, the Valkyrie which had brought us here was now providing air cover for the retreating Valhallans, if the transmissions I'd been monitoring in my comm-bead were anything to go by, and it would take several minutes to disengage, circle round, land, and embark us; minutes I was by no means sure we had. I glanced hopefully at the ceiling, but there was no sign of a trapdoor there, or anything by which we could have accessed one even if there had been.

'There's movement on the surface,' the pilot added, as I heard the first unmistakable scrabbling in the depths of the tunnel which meant the swarm beneath our feet was on the move again too. 'Closing on Blockhouse Four. Is that your position?'

‘It is,’ I confirmed, as the lasguns opened up again behind me. The external doors were solid, but they wouldn’t hold an entire swarm back for long, and with another horde of drooling malevolence doing its best to swamp us through the corridor, we couldn’t divert any of our rapidly-dwindling firepower to defend against an attack from the outside anyway.

I walked round the Chimeras, which had blocked my view of the far side of the entrance chamber, then stopped, staring, almost unable to believe the evidence of my own eyes. A cargo crawler was parked there, its loading doors open, and its bodywork miraculously unmarred by the furrowing of genestealer claws.

‘Jurgen!’ I called, sprinting towards it. ‘Can you get this thing started?’

‘Looks easy enough,’ my aide said, clambering up to the cab with remarkable agility, given that he was still burdened with the bulky melta. ‘Why isn’t it ripped apart like the Chimeras?’

‘Nobody hiding inside it, I suppose,’ I said, not really caring. It was intact enough to run, and that was all that mattered to me. I hauled myself into the cab after him, finding it a little cramped competing for space with my aide, his body odour, and our mutual collection of weapons, but I’d take a little crowding in preference to ending up as regurgitated biomass in a digestion pool any day.

Jurgen began poking around on the dashboard and I popped my head back out, cracking off a couple of shots at the termagants in the shadows of the tunnel mouth. It seemed that the hive mind had learned to be wary of us, and, unsure of how we’d managed to eliminate so many of its meat puppets in one fell swoop, wasn’t keen to commit them to a massed assault just yet. The Valhallans, Nusquans and Forres had hunkered down behind the wrecked Chimeras, and the two sides were exchanging largely ineffectual potshots. From my elevated position I was able to pick off one of the termagants with a, frankly, lucky head shot, before wondering belatedly if attracting their attention was such a good idea, but it raised morale and, more importantly, made it clear that I was getting stuck in along with everybody else. A second or so later, Forres, not wanting to be outdone, blew another apart with a shot from her toy bolter, which neatly established her as a higher priority target in any case.

‘That’s done it,’ Jurgen said a moment later, and the crawler’s engine rumbled into life. ‘Just need to get the outer doors open.’

‘There should be a remote override somewhere in the cab,’ Lanks put in

helpfully over the vox<sup>83</sup>.

‘Come on, then,’ I urged, cracking off another couple of covering shots as the Nusquans began running for the rear cargo doors. It was going to be pretty uncomfortable back there with nothing to sit on, but given the alternative I wasn’t expecting anyone to complain.

‘Pull back, by fire and movement,’ Grifen ordered crisply, and Magot’s team trotted after the Nusquans who’d begun scrambling up behind us, while Grifen’s switched to full auto, laying down a barrage to cover their retreat. Confident that I’d done enough to be seen to be participating, I ducked back inside the cab and scanned the unfamiliar dashboard.

‘This, you think?’ I prodded a large button speculatively, and flinched as an ear-splitting klaxon rebounded from the walls around us.

‘Try that one, sir,’ Jurgen suggested, indicating another, helpfully annotated *ext. access*. Slamming the cab door behind me I pressed it, while Magot’s team and the few Nusquans left with an effective firearm started laying into the encroaching swarm with commendable vigour from inside the cargo compartment, and Grifen’s people ran for the crawler as if Abaddon himself was after them. After what seemed like an agonising wait, but was probably no more than a handful of seconds, the great doors at the end of the hall began to move slowly apart, with a grinding of frozen metal and a crackling of ice still dimly audible through the metal and armourcrys enclosing the cab.

‘Here they come!’ Grifen called, and a torrent of tyranids burst from the tunnel mouth, as the coin belatedly dropped that the prey they’d believed trapped was on the verge of getting away. A volley of sustained fire met them, ripping into the front rank, and several of the creatures fell. The rest charged on, their headlong rush barely checked as they trampled the fallen underfoot in their eagerness to get to us.

‘Go!’ I shouted, but Jurgen had already slammed the cumbersome vehicle into gear and was accelerating away, leaving the hormagaunts which had broken free of the pack bounding fruitlessly in our wake. Howls and cheers of relief and derision echoed in my ear, until Forres restored vox discipline with a few choice words and some pious humbug about serving the Emperor to the best of our abilities. For a moment I feared we wouldn’t make it through the still-widening gap, but Jurgen judged it to a nicety as always, and our spinning tracks barely grazed the thick metal slabs on either side before finally biting down in the thick snow for which they’d been

designed. 'Hang on back there,' I voxed. 'It's going to be a rough ride.'

A prediction which, had I but known it, would turn out to be all too true.

'Incoming,' Jurgen said, pointing through flurries of wind-driven snow. A dark mass seemed to be moving towards us, flowing across the frigid surface, and with a shudder that had nothing to do with the ambient chill seeping through the insulation of the cab, I realised what it was. The swarm the pilot had warned us about had arrived.

'Can you avoid them?' I asked, and Jurgen shook his head, gunning the engine to a pitch which would have had our engineers wincing in sympathy.

'They're moving too fast,' he said, and I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry. The tide of chitin seemed endless, although as tyrannid swarms went I suppose it was still on the small side, and it had already swept round to envelop us. 'I'll have to punch through.'

'Good luck,' I said grimly, all too aware of how slim our chances were. I wouldn't have fancied them much even in a well-armoured Chimera, which had forward and turret-mounted heavy weapons to clear the way and a reassuring amount of metal plate to hide behind; but the relatively fragile civilian vehicle had neither. The minute we butted heads with a carnifex we'd be torn apart, even if we hadn't been slowed to a halt by the sheer mass of lesser creatures facing us, clogging our tracks with their pulverised bodies. I'd seen Baneblades immobilised that way before now, so I didn't give much for our chances of forcing our way through in the lightly-built crawler.

'We'll keep the ticks off your back,' our pilot's voice assured us cheerily, and the Valkyrie abruptly appeared from behind us, roaring in over our heads and opening fire on the frenzied mass of tyrannids scuttling towards us as it came. The multi-laser scythed through their ranks like a scalpel through flesh, creating a carpet of downed and flailing monstrosities, while those on either side of the line of destruction fell back, milling in confusion for a crucial few seconds as the surviving synapse creatures rearranged themselves to re-establish the neural net and regain control of the others.

'Hold on,' I voxed through to the rear compartment, 'it's about to get bumpy,' then the tracks were mashing chitin and flesh into the snow, staining it colours which made the gorge rise to look at too closely.

'Looks like someone threw up a seafood dinner,' Jurgen said, displaying an uncharacteristically poetic streak, and I nodded, not wanting to think



about that too much under the circumstances. A hail of fleshborer rounds rattled against the bodywork and windows, and a few gobbets of acid hissed their way through the metalwork, but fortunately without appearing to damage anything vital.

‘Anyone hurt back there?’ I asked.

‘A few holes in the side,’ Grifen reported, ‘but no casualties.’

‘Stupid frakkers just gave us some firing points,’ Magot added, no doubt itching to poke her lasgun through and start potting ’nids again.

‘No need,’ I assured her as the Vakyrrie banked lazily in the distance, and came back for another strafing run. ‘The flyboys are doing the job for us.’

‘All part of the service,’ the pilot assured us, a tone of amusement entering his voice. Then the nose-mounted weapon opened up again, carving another swathe through the swarm and throwing it into confusion once more. By the time he’d banked round for a third run the first of the Valkyries carrying Lustig’s people to safety had joined in too, and the balance had tilted decisively in favour of the Imperium. With too few of the hulking warriors left to coordinate the swarm effectively, the entire formation began to disintegrate, the termagants scuttling off in search of a place to hide, while the hormagaunts began devouring the carrion which littered the gruesomely-stained ice.

‘We’re clear,’ Jurgen said a moment later, slewing us round a little to bounce a fleeing termagant under the tracks, where it expired messily.

‘I believe we are,’ I said, sighing deeply with relief, and realising rather too late that I was going to be in a confined space with Jurgen for several hours. ‘Let’s hope we get a clear run back to Primadelving.’

My aide nodded, in his usual phlegmatic manner, his attention almost entirely on the snowfield in front of us. ‘Power cells are charged, and the weather looks fair,’ he assured me. ‘We should get there without too many problems.’

A prediction which was to prove a long way wide of the mark.



## SEVENTEEN

I was no stranger to iceworlds, and to this one in particular, but I must confess to finding the long journey back to Primadelving a rather enjoyable novelty. (At least until its premature and unfortunate termination.) On most of the previous occasions I'd been driven across the surface it had been aboard a Chimera, from which the view had been somewhat restricted to say the least; but the high, glazed cab of the crawler afforded an unimpeded view of the icefields and undulating snowdrifts, which enabled me to appreciate the rugged panorama in a manner which had previously eluded me. I'd been out there on foot, of course, rather more often than I would have liked, but on those occasions I'd been a bit too preoccupied with the immense discomfort of the cold, and the likelihood of something trying to kill me, to stop and admire the view.

About half an hour after we'd left the agricave behind, the snowclouds which seemed to have blanketed everything since our first arrival on the surface of Nusquam Fundumentibus finally parted, revealing a sky of bright, translucent blue, against which the snow and ice glittered, dazzling the eye.

'You don't want to be looking too long at that,' Jurgen said, manipulating one of the controls to polarise the windscreen. 'It'll send you snowblind.'

'At least I'm not the one driving,' I said, picking out the bright moving dot of one of the Valkyries in the distance; still searching for tyranids roaming about on the surface, although most of the remnants of the swarm had long since retreated back into the depths of the agricave, safe from aerial

bombardment, and all but the most suicidal of attempts to dislodge them from their underground refuge. 'I'm sure Magot would take a turn if you needed a break.'

By way of reply he just snorted, and opened the throttle a little wider, sending us skimming across an open ice sheet, the plume of powdered snow flung up by our tracks dissipating slowly in the air behind us. 'Have you seen how she drives?'

'Good point,' I conceded, not wanting to wound his pride, and noticing that for once he seemed to be moderating our speed. Not only that, he was adjusting our course seemingly at random, turning to the left or right every few moments for no reason that I could see. 'Is there a problem?'

'Crevasse field,' he told me, as though it were only a minor matter, which I suppose for an iceworlder it may well have been. 'The snow covers most of 'em, but the ice is riddled.'

'Very deep?' I asked, trying to sound casual, and Jurgen nodded.

'Probably no more than twenty or thirty metres for a really big one,' he said. 'But there won't be many of those to worry about. It's the small ones that'll break our tracks if we hit 'em wrong.'

'I see,' I said, trying not to think about a thirty metre plunge any more than I could help, and glancing around us for some sign of a distraction. A flicker of movement near the crest of a nearby ice ridge caught my attention, and I fumbled the amplivisor into my hand for a closer look.

'More 'nids?' Jurgen asked, and I nodded, trying to focus the image despite the bouncing of the fast-moving vehicle.

'Close combat forms,' I said, finally getting a clear image. 'About half a dozen, looks like. And one of the larger warrior forms.'

'That's unusual,' Jurgen remarked, changing our course towards them, just as the last of the group disappeared behind the ridge. 'They don't normally bother herding so few.'

'No, they don't,' I agreed, uneasily. 'Perhaps I just saw the tail end of a larger group.'

'Do you think we should check it out?' Jurgen asked, and I nodded.

'I think we'd better,' I conceded reluctantly. In my experience, tyranids acting atypically never meant anything good. If they had another little surprise to spring on us, I'd rather they did so where there was plenty of room to see it coming, and from a vehicle which would allow me to outrun them easily. I voxed the Valkyrie. 'We've just sighted a small group of

'nids,' I said. 'Moving to intercept.'

'Acknowledged,' the pilot said, 'and on the way. They should be easy enough to spot from the air. Just got a few stragglers to mop up here first.'

'I'm not sure these are stragglers,' I confided to Jurgen. We'd seen several packs of 'gaunts wandering aimlessly through the desolate landscape, or attempting to take refuge from the shadows of the gunships<sup>84</sup>, but none so far had been under the direction of a synapse creature; whereas the ones we'd seen were definitely moving with purpose. 'Can you get close enough for a reasonable view, without coming into range of their weapons?' The warrior I'd seen only seemed to be carrying the deathspitter common to such creatures, which made sense if it was leading a swarm of close combat organisms, but there could easily be another I'd missed, with something longer ranged, and capable of making a mess of our vehicle.

'Reckon so,' Jurgen agreed, starting up the side of the ridge, heedless of the profanity echoing from the cargo compartment behind us as the floor suddenly tilted without warning. 'If I stop just short of the crest, we can take a look over without them seeing us.'

He was as good as his word, as always, bringing the ungainly crawler to a halt in the lee of a cluster of ice boulders, which the wind had sculpted into semi-transparent mirrors. Ignoring my bizarrely distorted reflection, I trained the amplivisor down to the floor of the defile beyond the line of the ridge.

'They're just hitting the ice with their scything claws,' I said, in some puzzlement. 'Breaking it up into small pieces.'

'Are they trying to dig in?' Kasteen asked, her voice buzzing in my comm-bead, and sounding almost as bewildered as I felt. Tyranids never built fortifications, or anything else come to that; manipulating their inanimate surroundings was as alien to their nature as horticulture to a necron. 'Or trying to tunnel back to the caves to get away from the aircraft?'

'I don't think so,' I said. They were spread out too widely to be pooling their efforts, although each one was making quite rapid progress in pulverising the ice in its immediate vicinity. 'They're not exactly designed for digging.' Though I had to concede that the long, curved claws seemed to make pretty effective pickaxes.

'Only one of the big ones I can see,' Jurgen put in helpfully, and I nodded, more puzzled than ever. The presence of the warrior implied a specific end in view, but what it might be continued to elude me.

‘Not for long,’ the Valkyrie pilot assured us, and began his attack run. Warned by the noise of the engine and the shadow which swooped across them, the ’gaunts raised their heads and shifted uncertainly, looking for something to charge, but their overseer kept their instinctive aggression in check, and they began moving towards an overhang of ice at a rapid trot.

Before they could make it, the Valkyrie opened fire, strafing the group with its multi-laser. A line of steam and pulverised ice swept across the scattered swarm, tearing several of them apart, and throwing the rest into momentary disarray, but the warrior remained unharmed and rallied them, turning to fire its deathspitter ineffectually at the harrying aircraft as it banked steeply and came round for another go. This time all the creatures had managed to reach the refuge of the overhang, but it did them little good: the whole ice face disappeared for a moment in a cloud of superheated steam, then, with a grinding roar audible even through the bodywork of the crawler’s cab, it collapsed on top of them.

‘Job done,’ the pilot said, with every sign of satisfaction.

‘Let’s hope so,’ I said, having considerably more experience of the resilience of tyrannids than he did. Accordingly we remained where we were, the engine idling, while I kept the amplivisor trained on the pile of frozen rubble, alert for any sign of movement; but after some minutes passed without so much as a twitch, I began to breathe easier. (Or as easy as it was possible to do, sharing a small cab with Jurgen.)

‘Shall we go, sir?’ my aide asked, once it became clear that the ’nids weren’t about to pop up again, and I nodded.

‘Might as well,’ I agreed, mindful of the pot of hot tanna waiting for me back in Primadelving, and raised the amplivisor for one last look. An impulse I regretted instantly. ‘Do iceworlds have earthquakes?’

‘Not really,’ Jurgen said, craning his neck to look in the same direction. ‘The ice shifts sometimes, or you might get an avalanche...’ His voice trailed off, taking on an unmistakable tone of puzzlement. ‘That’s not an avalanche.’

The ice was beginning to crack and bulge, right where the ’gaunts had been hammering away at it, rising up and falling away, to reveal something vast and living beneath it. A roar of anger and frustration echoed across the icefield as something huge and animate fought to free itself from the imprisoning ice.

‘Go!’ I shouted, slapping Jurgen on the shoulder in my eagerness to be

anywhere but here; a desire he evidently shared, judging by the speed with which he slammed the crawler into gear and took off, our spinning tracks throwing up a glittering arc of pulverised snow in our wake.

‘What’s that noise?’ Forres voxed from the rear compartment, her voice overlapping with Grifen’s somewhat calmer request for information.

‘One of the huge ones,’ I replied, glancing back to see a mountain of chitin rearing up to its full height, its bloated body dwarfing our crawler, as it shook the last of the broken ice from an impossibly spindly-seeming leg.

‘Then we should stop and engage it,’ Forres said, ‘before it can join the main body of the swarm.’

‘If we do that, we’ll die,’ I snapped back, in no mood for any more of her head-on approach to warfare. ‘Our small arms can barely scratch its hide.’

‘Nevertheless,’ Forres said, audibly bristling, ‘our duty demands...’

‘Our duty demands we live to report this, so we can mount an effective defence and save this planet for the Emperor,’ I said, in no mood for argument. I glanced back, seeing, to my horror, the vast bulk scrambling over the ridgeline behind us, blotting out the watery sunshine as it came, clearly in pursuit of our fleeing vehicle. ‘If you want to take a crack at it anyway, just open the rear door.’

‘I thought you’d never ask,’ Magot chipped in happily, and a second or two later the rapid *crack* of lasguns became audible through the bulkhead separating the cab from the cargo compartment.

‘Sir,’ Grifen reported a moment later, ‘it’s started spawning. Just dropped a dozen or so of the gunners.’

‘Keep down,’ I advised unnecessarily. ‘If they get close enough to use their fleshborers...’

‘I know,’ Grifen said. ‘Can’t we outrun them?’

‘That’s the idea,’ I said, turning to Jurgen as I spoke. ‘Can we speed up at all?’

‘It’s risky,’ he replied, the thin furrows of grime on his forehead eloquent testament to the effort he was having to expend to keep up our pace on the treacherous terrain. ‘The ground’s very broken here, and there’s no telling what’s under the snow.’

‘I can tell you what’s behind us at the moment,’ I said acidly, then regretted it at once. Jurgen had an almost preternatural ability to push a vehicle to its limits, which he exercised at every opportunity, and if it was at all possible to be travelling faster he undoubtedly would be. ‘Just do your

best. Under the circumstances, there's no one I'd rather have in the driving seat.'

'Thank you, sir,' he said, any offence he might have taken at my earlier offhand manner effectively neutralised, and returned his attention to picking his way through the treacherous landscape. Our engine roared as we lurched over innumerable cracks in the surface and metre-high ridges, every obstruction costing us a little more of our precious lead. 'If I can just get through this, we should be back in the clear at any...' Then the snow gave way beneath us, and the whole vehicle dropped.

For a heart-stopping instant I thought we were dead, about to plunge thirty metres to an icy grave, but we turned out to have hit nothing more than a shallow trench, little different to the ones which had impeded us before. This time, however, the angle had been bad, leaving us canted awkwardly; Jurgen gunned the engine, but nothing happened, beyond a howl of protest from the abused mechanism and a short burst of profanity from my aide.

'That's it,' he said shortly, 'the track's frakked,' and, sure enough, as I looked out of the side window, I could see that it had been sprung from its guide wheels by the impact.

'Can you ease it back on?' I asked, with an apprehensive glance at the looming bulk of the onrushing leviathan, bearing down on us like an ill-tempered storm front, its progeny skittering around its feet as it came.

'Not a chance,' Jurgen said gloomily. 'We're wedged in.' He grabbed the melta and flung open the cab door, replacing his aroma with air so cold I lost the ability to smell anything almost at once. 'Best get to it, then, I suppose.'

'I suppose we'd better,' I said, following him out onto the snowy surface after a quick scramble up a slope of broken ice. The Valhallans and Nusquans bailed out after us, still blazing away, as though it would make any difference to the behemoth.

'Place your feet carefully,' Jurgen advised. 'There are bound to be more crevasses about.'

'I'll bear that in mind,' I said, looking around for something to take cover behind, and almost bumping into Forres, who was staring at the gargantuan creature bearing down on us as though still struggling to take it in. (Which I suppose, in all fairness, she might well have been.) I smiled at her, but without much amusement. 'Well, commissar, it looks as though we'll be trying it your way after all.'

‘Aim for its head,’ she told Lanks, pointedly ignoring me. ‘That’ll be where it’s most vulnerable.’

‘It’s not vulnerable anywhere to lasgun rounds,’ I said. ‘Concentrate on the termagants. Leave the big one to Jurgen and the Valkyrie.’ The melta had been designed to knock out tanks, so it should be able to get through the huge creature’s exoskeleton, although whether it would hit anything vital once it did would be a matter for luck and the Emperor.

‘Sounds good to me,’ Grifen said decisively. Lanks looked at her, then me, then finally back to Forres.

After a moment the young Commissar shrugged. ‘Follow their recommendations,’ she said shortly. ‘They’ve fought tyrannids before.’

‘And won,’ Magot added cheerfully.

I nodded, as if I shared her confidence, although truth to tell I was far from doing so. The frozen ground was shaking beneath my feet, and the shadow of the oncoming leviathan seemed large enough to blot out the sun. The crack of lasgun fire opened up again, still disciplined, I was pleased to note, and the termagants scuttling round the feet of the gigantic creature flinched for a moment before the overriding will of their dam drove them on.

‘Commencing attack run,’ the Valkyrie pilot voxed, and a moment later twin streaks of fire struck the monster high on its flank, followed almost at once by a double explosion which tore open its carapace. Viscera and noisome fluids gushed and fountained, and the towering creature staggered, bellowing in anger and pain. It reared up on its back four legs, flailing at the swooping aircraft like a man bothered by a fly, then staggered as its forelimbs crashed back to the ice. Its retinue began to mill around uncertainly, failing to press the attack. ‘Lucky I hung on to the Hellstrikes like you told me to.’

‘It was indeed,’ I agreed. The two warheads had inflicted a hideous wound, but the tervigon seemed far from out of the fight. It came on inexorably towards us, slipping occasionally in the spreading slick of its own ichor, exposed organs and musculature pulsing as it came. It had slowed, however, and that alone was reason enough to hope.

‘Get down!’ Grifen bellowed, having spotted the telltale quivering along its back an instant before I did. The Valhallans and I hit the snow, Forres and the Nusquans following suit a moment later, without stopping to argue or ask questions about it, which I suppose was progress of a sort. A salvo of cluster spines hissed through the air, shattering into a storm of razor-edged



flechettes as they hit the ground, which pattered all around me like sinister rain, and felled a couple of the tardiest Nusquans.

‘Target the wound!’ I shouted, raising myself enough to crack off a few shots at the towering monstrosity with my laspistol, and the troopers followed suit, Valhallans and Nusquans alike.

‘You said it was pointless firing lasguns at it,’ Forres said, her tone challenging, ‘and to concentrate on the termagants.’

‘That was before. It’s vulnerable now.’ I continued to shoot steadily as I spoke. ‘If we kill it, the spawn die too.’<sup>85</sup>

‘If they don’t kill us first,’ Forres observed, as the first fleshborer fusillade fell a few metres short of our position, but she shifted her aim nonetheless, peppering the area around the gaping hole in the behemoth’s armour with a flurry of bolts<sup>86</sup>; a couple detonated against the organs inside, and the flesh mountain staggered again. The constant rain of las-rounds against exposed viscera must have been agonising, which may have accounted for the loose control it appeared to have over its offspring; they skittered nervously, firing individually, then scurrying back into the cover afforded by their parent’s legs, instead of forming a skirmish line ahead of it as I would have expected.

‘Whenever you’re ready, Jurgen,’ I said, as my aide lined up a shot with the melta. ‘Take your time.’ The shot had to be a clean one: as soon as he fired, he’d mark himself out as the greatest threat among us, and the tervigon and its offspring would react accordingly.

‘Almost there, sir,’ he assured me, shifting the cumbersome weapon a millimetre or two, then pulled the trigger. I closed my eyes reflexively, seeing the bright flare through the lids, and blinked, afterimages continuing to dance on my retina. ‘That ought to do it.’

‘I think you’re right,’ I said, in mingled surprise and relief. The shot had been a clean one, as I’d had no doubt it would be, the ravening blast of energy penetrating deep into the monster’s body. With a keen ululation it fell, legs scrabbling for traction, and crushing most of the termagants around it into the ice with the weight of its own body.

‘Forward!’ Forres yelled. ‘Finish it off while it’s down!’ Brandishing her chainsword, she ran towards it, while the rest of us looked at one another in astonishment.

‘Look out!’ I shouted, seeing its head turn, jaws which could bite a Chimera in half snapping angrily. I had no objection to her getting herself

killed – in fact it would probably save a lot of lives in the long run – but just standing aside and watching it happen wasn't the kind of behaviour expected of a Hero of the Imperium. If there was any chance of saving this miserable iceball, we needed the Nusquans to be fully committed to its defence, and convinced they could win, which unfortunately meant living up to my unmerited reputation yet again. Cursing all over-enthusiastic idiots, I charged forward, intending to drag her back; but she'd seen the danger, and her bolt pistol barked, just as the downed leviathan opened its jaws. The explosive round detonated against the back of its throat, and the entire monstrosity convulsed.

'That should put an end to it,' she said, in a self-congratulatory fashion, holstering her weapon as she turned to meet me.

'It was dying anyway!' I expostulated, catching a glimpse of movement behind her. It may have been down, but it was certainly not out, spawning a fresh brood of termagants to take revenge on its behalf. A small knot of them was moving out of the shadow of their parent, their carapaces still glistening with the fluids of the nutrient sac they'd been cocooned in during their dormancy, fleshborers raised. I fired my laspistol, turning to flee, then the snow gave way beneath my boot.

I pitched forward, falling free for a moment, then slammed into a steep slope of ice, down which I slithered for a second or two, doing my much abused uniform no favours in the process. Above my head I could hear the crackle of lasgun fire, and the distinctive *hisssss crack!* of Forres's miniature bolter, then everything abruptly went silent.

'Commissar!' Grifen's voice echoed in my comm-bead. 'Are you all right?'

'I'm fine,' I replied, after a second or two to make sure of the fact. Dim blue daylight reflected off the ice all round me, so I was able to make out my surroundings with little difficulty. I was in an icy cleft, some three or four metres deep and of indeterminate length, roofed over for the most part by a thick layer of compacted snow. 'Just found one of those crevasses Jurgen warned me about. What's going on up there?'

'It just died,' Grifen said. 'And the termagants with it. Just rolled over in the middle of the firefight.'

'Any casualties?' I asked, because it never hurt to look as if I cared.

'No fresh ones,' Grifen assured me, 'although one of the Nusquans is in a pretty bad way from the cluster spine barrage. Can you climb out the way

you fell in?’

‘Don’t think so,’ I said, taking out my luminator and shining it around in an attempt to get a better picture of where I was. The slope I’d slithered down was too sheer and slippery to even think about trying. ‘There might be a cable or something in the crawler’s toolkit.’

‘Already on my way back to see, sir,’ Jurgen cut in, as reliable as ever, and, reassured, I began to make my way along the crevasse. At least I was out of that damned wind, for once, and although it could hardly be described as warm, at least I felt more comfortable than I had on the surface.

‘I’ll see if it gets any easier further along,’ I said, by no means certain that it would, but at least going to find out would give me something to do while I waited for rescue. The reflective nature of the ice surrounding me made the luminator appear much brighter than it would normally do, and I made good progress, in spite of the treacherous surface underfoot.

As I went on, I began to notice occasional patches of discolouration in the translucent ice, and, moved more by idle curiosity than anything else, I stopped by one which seemed clearer than most. There seemed to be something solid embedded in it, and I held up the luminator, rubbing the smooth surface with my glove as if trying to clear the condensation from a misty window. It achieved nothing, of course, beyond making my palm wet, but as I moved the hand holding the luminator a little more to one side, the angle of the beam shifted, throwing the entombed object into sharp relief.

‘Emperor’s bowels!’ I expostulated, with an involuntary flinch backwards. The serpentine form of a tyranid ravener, twice my size, was coiled through the ice, seemingly poised to burst out and attack. A moment later, as the hammering of my heart died back to more normal levels, I began to breathe a little more easily. The foul creature was clearly inert, entombed like the tervigon had been. It might even have been dead, but after what I’d seen earlier, I doubted that; it only needed the presence of an active synapse creature to rouse and join the ever-swelling ranks of the tyranid invasion.

‘Say again, commissar?’ Grifen asked, with an air of puzzlement.

‘There are ’nids down here,’ I said, all too aware of the consternation my words would be causing back in Primadelving. ‘Hibernating or dead, although my money would be on the first. If they all wake...’ I let the thought trail off, unwilling to verbalise it.

Kasteen, however, had no such scruples. ‘We won’t stand a chance,’ she

finished for me.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## EIGHTEEN

‘Well, at least we know where the greenskins went,’ Broklaw said, with a typically sardonic grin. ‘The ’nids have been eating them.’

I nodded, although none of the other faces ranged around the conference table in a room adjacent to the main command post seemed to find anything remotely amusing in the situation. Kasteen, Broklaw and I were seated along one side of the polished wooden slab, while Colonel Brecca, her second-in-command (whose name I still hadn’t managed to catch), and Forres faced us, looking fidgety and uncomfortable, which I could hardly blame them for. At the rate things were going, they wouldn’t have a regiment left to lead before too much longer<sup>87</sup>. Clothilde was at the head of the table, as protocol demanded, surrounded by a small clot of advisors, who, for the most part, seemed well aware of how out of their depth they were, and were sensible enough to stay quiet as a consequence. The militia contingent was on the same side of the table as the Nusquans, which seemed reasonable enough as it was their damn planet and they were used to working together, which left the Adeptus Mechanicus delegation (headed of course by Izembard), and the other Imperial institutions<sup>88</sup> on ours.

‘Thus replacing one problem with another,’ Clothilde remarked, with a glance towards the general staffers, who for the most part looked as far out of their depth as she did.

‘We should be able to turn this to our advantage,’ Forres said, with the calm assurance of total ignorance. ‘If we can manoeuvre the tyranids into directly confronting the orks, they’ll eradicate the greenskins, and be

weakened enough for us to pick off the survivors easily.'

'Except that every ork they consume makes the whole swarm stronger,' Kasteen pointed out<sup>89</sup>, 'not to mention their own casualties. Trying to use the 'nids against the orks is about as sensible as trying to hide a scorch mark in the hearthrug by burning the house down.'

'A colourful analogy,' I said, to forestall any heated response from Forres, 'but the point is essentially correct. The orks are a sideshow now, and they'll keep. We need to turn every resource we possess against the tyranids, while we can still make a difference.' Kasteen and Broklaw were nodding in agreement, knowing all too well how big a threat the creatures posed compared to the one we'd been sent here to deal with. To my relief Clothilde was nodding too, evidently convinced by our argument.

'What I want to know is where the horrid things came from in the first place,' she said. 'Our auspexes haven't recorded any unusual activity in the system, have they?'

This last question was addressed to a woman with iron-grey hair, in the uniform of an admiral of the System Defence Fleet; judging by the strain her girth imposed on the fastenings, her days of active service in the cramped confines of a warship were long behind her.

'Nothing,' she responded at once, 'although that doesn't mean there's nothing there. Tyranid vessels are notoriously difficult to detect at long ranges. The SDF is mounting a reconnaissance sweep of the inner system, but that'll take some time to complete.'

'Especially as the entire fleet consists of two customs cutters and a courier boat,' Kasteen muttered, *sotto voce*<sup>90</sup>.

'If there is a hive ship in system,' I said, 'it must be alone. Astropathic communication hasn't been disrupted by the shadow a fleet would cast in the warp.' Something I was completely certain about, having dispatched a brief summation of the situation to Amberley at the earliest opportunity, on the assumption that the sudden appearance of tyranids far in advance of the oncoming hive fleets was bound to be of interest to her particular branch of the Inquisition<sup>91</sup>. The chances of her turning up to sort out the matter in person were unfortunately minimal, however, which left us on our own to deal with it.

'That's something, anyway,' Clothilde said. 'At least we can call for help.'

'Already done,' Kasteen said crisply, with a nod at the grey-robed astropath sitting at the far end of the table. 'Reinforcements should be on

their way from Coronus. How long they take to arrive, though...' She shrugged expressively, all too familiar with the vagaries of warp travel, not to mention the inertia of the Munitorum, and the pressing need for far more troopers in far more places than the Guard actually possessed.

'That's most encouraging,' Clothilde said, 'but it still hasn't answered my question. Why have the tyranids suddenly appeared out of nowhere?'

'Because they've always been here,' Izembard said, his flat mechanical drone adding to the drama of his announcement. 'Preliminary analysis of the specimens found by Commissar Cain, and the depth of the ice around them, would suggest that they were frozen approximately seven thousand years ago. Assuming a relatively even rate of ice formation, of course.'

'Long before the planet was colonised,' Brecca put in, for the benefit of those of us from offworld.

'They must have been stranded here,' Izembard went on, unperturbed by the interruption. 'Finding nothing to consume, they returned to the dormant state in which they'd travelled between the stars, becoming buried by the drifting snow.'

'But people have been living here for millennia,' Forres protested. 'How come nobody's stumbled across one before now?'

'Because it's an iceworld,' I said. 'People stick close to the cavern cities or one of the outposts, unless they absolutely have to. That's how the orks disappeared so thoroughly after the invasion.' Then, struck by an even more unsettling thought, I added: 'Besides, maybe someone has found a 'nid from time to time. If one got roused by the presence of prey, it'd go dormant again after feeding, wouldn't it?'

'Perhaps,' Izembard said, his artificial monotone failing to disguise his scepticism.

'That still doesn't explain why so many of them have woken up now,' Broklaw objected, 'right after we arrived...' His voice trailed off as a rather large coin suddenly dropped.

'It was us,' I said. 'When our ship crashed, it melted the ice all around the impact site, and there must have been a few tyranids close enough to be thawed out.' All of a sudden the movement I remembered spotting in the water, and in the snowstorm when Jurgen and I had found the abandoned ork vehicles, took on far greater and more sinister significance.

'Then why didn't they just attack you while you disembarked?' Forres asked, clearly impatient with so wild a flight of fancy.

‘Because they’ve been biding their time,’ I said. ‘Picking off the orks for biomass, and digging out more of the buried ones.’

‘So now we’re facing an army of the things,’ Kasteen concluded.

‘I’m afraid we are,’ I said. ‘The only good news is that we’ll be getting reinforcements and they won’t.’

‘We can’t just sit back and wait for the troopships to arrive,’ Forres said, making her first intelligent contribution of the day. ‘The tyranids could have overrun us by then.’

‘We’re stretched pretty thin already,’ Brecca put in, ‘and there are hundreds of sites around the Leeward Barrens we need to protect. If we pull our picket lines back, that’ll give us more units to redeploy, but the rest of the orks can just rampage across the province.’

‘The orks are not the problem,’ I reiterated, amazed that she hadn’t seemed to grasp that yet. ‘If they do advance, they’ll just keep the ’nids busy while we evacuate as many of the outlying settlements as we can, and get on with reinforcing the garrisons in the main population centres.’

I exchanged an uneasy glance with Kasteen and Broklaw as I spoke. We all knew from experience that concentrating the population in larger groups was doing little more than setting up a smorgasbord so far as the tyranids were concerned, but at least it would mean fewer sites to defend.

‘That still leaves us stretched damnably thin,’ Brecca said, reasonably enough. ‘What we really need is some way of predicting which sites are most at risk of attack.’

‘Magos?’ Clothilde asked, looking down the table at Izembard. ‘Have you any suggestions?’

‘We are working on a predictive algorithm,’ the tech-priest assured her, ‘but the variables involved are both numerous and difficult to calculate.’

‘It might help if we knew why they attacked the sites they did,’ Forres said, which made two sensible comments in a row, a record so far as I could see.

‘And how,’ I added. ‘The external doors to the power plant were all sealed when we arrived.’

‘Same with the agricaves,’ Forres said.

‘No mystery why they struck there,’ Broklaw put in. ‘All that biomass would seem like the motherlode to a ’nid swarm.’

‘That doesn’t explain how they detected it,’ Brecca said. ‘Or how so many of them were able to get inside without anyone noticing.’



‘They do have some specialised organisms bred for infiltration,’ Izembard put in helpfully.

‘But we didn’t see any of those,’ I replied. ‘Just ’gaunts and genestealers, with a few of the warrior forms to keep them focused.’

‘That’s all we saw too,’ Forres confirmed. ‘When we arrived, the place seemed abandoned, then they just started swarming up out of the lower levels.’

‘Which is where we found them in the power plant,’ I added, just as Jurgen leaned over my shoulder to place a mug of recaff on the table. Given the sensitivity of the matters we were discussing, few of the palace servants could be trusted to serve refreshments during the meeting, so Jurgen was standing in for them, his status as my aide putting both his probity and discretion beyond question. As I moved to pick up the steaming beverage, I caught a full strength whiff of his personal miasma, and a stray thought fell into place. ‘Near the volcanic vents.’

‘There were vents in the agricave too,’ Forres added. ‘We could smell the sulphur, even though we never got down to the deepest parts.’

‘You’re surely not suggesting these creatures got in through the lava flow?’ Clothilde asked, incredulity ringing in her voice. ‘They’d be burned to a crisp.’

‘They would,’ I agreed, the memory of the swarm advancing across the narrow isthmus of rock surrounded by magma to attack Hell’s Edge still uncomfortably vivid, ‘if they fell in. But I’ve seen them withstand incredible temperatures. And some of them can squeeze through gaps far too narrow for a human.’

‘Warriors can’t,’ Kasteen objected.

‘It’s an interesting hypothesis, nevertheless,’ Izembard put in. ‘Many of the tyranid forms are adapted for burrowing, and Commissar Cain himself witnessed hormagaunts digging in a manner most unusual for their kind. With sufficient determination, the swarm might well be able to enlarge the natural fissures in the rock enough to squeeze through.’

‘Then we’re frakked,’ Broklaw said flatly. ‘This whole area’s riddled with them, isn’t it?’

‘It is,’ Izembard confirmed, his mechanical drone imbuing the words with an air of inescapable doom. ‘However, the geological stresses would force any passages dug closed again in relatively short order.’

‘So the entire swarm can’t travel that way?’ Kasteen asked, and the magos

shook his head.

‘Not in any great numbers, or for any appreciable distance. I would assume it to be a strategy for circumventing defences, or striking without warning.’

‘That’s something anyway,’ Kasteen said, clearly determined to find something positive in the situation. ‘We just need to keep a look out for the main body on the surface, and rig up seismographs to warn us if any are tunnelling in.’

‘They may not be entirely reliable,’ Izembard warned, ‘given the unstable nature of the Leeward Barrens. Minor shocks and tremors are registering all the time.’

‘It’s got to be better than nothing,’ Kasteen said, triggering nods of agreement around the table.

‘Does any of this help your predictive algorithm?’ I asked Izembard, trying to purge the question of any lingering trace of sarcasm, and he nodded thoughtfully.

‘It narrows a few of the parameters down,’ he said cautiously. ‘But there’s one target I can predict with complete confidence.’

‘And that is?’ Forres asked, as though itching to march off at once to defend it.

An expression as close to surprise as was possible on a visage with so high a proportion of metal to flesh flickered across the tech-priest’s face. He raised an arm, sweeping it to take in our immediate surroundings. ‘Primadelving,’ he said, as though it was obvious.

I nodded, my mouth dry. ‘Biggest concentration of biomass on the planet,’ I agreed.



*Editorial Note:*

*In the interest of giving a wider perspective on the campaign, I have once again been forced to turn to the most reliable and least readable of the eyewitness accounts. Those of my readers who feel that the additional clarification it affords is scant recompense for the labour of perusing it may rest assured that nothing essential will be lost by omitting to do so, although it does fill in a few gaps in Cain's account.*

From *Like a Phoenix on the Wing: the Early Campaigns and Glorious Victories of the Valhallan 597th* by General Jenit Sulla (retired), 101.M42.

If any among us felt dismay or trepidation at the news of the tyranid presence here, among the pristine snows and cloud-capped mountains of fair Nusquam Fundumentibus, no sign of it was evident among the doughty warriors I was so privileged to lead. Instead, a spirit of grim determination suffused us all, our resolve bolstered as always by the shining example of Commissar Cain. Despite enduring so much to uncover this new and dreadful threat, Cain remained calm and resolute, his unfailing good humour and unshakable confidence in our ultimate victory doing so much to steady the nerves of any who might waver.

To my quiet pride, First Company was given the task of cleansing the cavern complex of the swarm which had infested it, and from which the noble Commissar had so heroically rescued the beleaguered survivors of the Nusquan First, his exceptional leadership and expertise in overcoming these loathsome creatures proving as inspiring to the women and men of the

fledgling local regiment as to our own.

Having read and reread his characteristically self-effacing account of events, along with Sergeant Grifen's after-action report and that of her Nusquan opposite number, I had determined our optimum strategy to be a steady advance, cavern by cavern, with the flamers of our special weapons squads in the vanguard, supported by the massed firepower of at least two infantry squads. This, I felt, would be sufficient to blunt any attempt to overwhelm us by sheer weight of numbers, the favoured tactic of the hive mind, but one which would be far less effective in the relatively confined spaces of the cavern system, where the passageways connecting them would create choke points, restricting the number of creatures able to engage us at any given time. In order to maximise this advantage, I proposed to block the passages tangential to our advance with demolition charges, thus preventing the foul xenos spawn from outflanking us.

In the event, however, the meticulously-planned operation proved something of an anti-climax; as our Chimeras parked around the periphery of the complex, where their heavy bolters could create overlapping fire lanes, either clearing the way for our advance, or, Emperor forbend, covering an orderly retreat should the enemy prove more formidable than expected, we could detect no sign of movement on the surface, beyond the picturesque swirling of the wind-driven snow. Our advance into the complex went almost completely unopposed, only a handful of the unnaturally twisted organisms remaining there, no doubt, to ensure that no speck of organic matter which might previously have escaped their notice went unconsumed; these were dispatched as quickly and enthusiastically as one might wish, and their cadavers incinerated to ensure that the tyranids would be permanently deprived of the resources they contained. Of the great mass of the swarm there was no sign to be seen, the vast majority of its members already having departed in search of fresh provender to consume.

In the days that followed, however, we were to see plenty of evidence of its further depredations, as outlying settlements and installations fell victim to its relentless advance. Though the planetary governor, following the sound advice of Colonel Kasteen and Commissar Cain, had ordered a general evacuation of all such vulnerable habitations, the work took time, and the tyranids exploited every delay. Almost as bad, in its way, was the advance of the orkish hordes, which took full advantage of the

redeployment of the Imperial forces to meet the greater threat by surging unchecked across the icefields, looting and despoiling such luckless communities as fell into their hands before the tyrannids could reach them.

Inevitably the two xenos breeds clashed, buying valuable time for the evacuation effort, but we were all aware that a battle for our very survival, and that of the whole planet, was imminent. When it came, of course, Commissar Cain was to be at the forefront, his contribution decisive, as so often in his illustrious career.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## NINETEEN

As so often happens when facing the tyrannids, we were thrown on the defensive, which is never a good place to be. Just to make matters worse the tyrannids had split into several smaller groups, which ranged the Leeward Barrens more or less at will, striking small and undefended targets before they could be evacuated or defended<sup>92</sup>. The only positive thing was that, so far, the infestation was still confined to the Barrens; so the evacuated civilians were sent to other provinces, in the hope that we could contain the situation before it grew to the point where they'd be back on the menu wherever they were.

'We should be thinking about evacuating the capital too,' I said, seizing the chance for a relatively quiet talk with Clothilde which an invitation to dine in her private quarters had afforded. It was nothing unusual for a planetary governor to host some kind of reception for the senior officers of a newly-arrived regiment, which was generally extended to include the commissar and any other advisors attached to the command staff, but the guest list for such affairs normally ran into the low hundreds, all the local nobility and their hangers-on jockeying for a chance to be seen with the defenders of the Imperium. Given the swarms of inbred parasites which my inflated reputation seemed to attract, despite the presence of Jurgen at my elbow, I generally sent my excuses, but in this case the governor had made it quite clear that it was to be a small, informal affair; and given the culinary skills of the average palace chef, I'd felt it churlish to refuse.

Even so, I'd been surprised to find that Kasteen, Broklaw and I would be

dining solely with her, and scarcely less so by the subsequent discovery that the reason was her desire to discuss the situation more openly than she'd be able to do surrounded by her usual coterie of advisors.

'Out of the question,' she said. 'Primadelving is the seat of government, and this palace the symbol of Imperial authority. Abandoning it would send entirely the wrong signals to the populace.'

'I'm not suggesting you go,' I said, slicing into some kind of roast mushroom which almost covered my plate<sup>93</sup>, 'but there's a significant civilian population here, which remains at risk for as long as the tyranids are at large. They should be moved to a safer area as soon as possible.'

'All three million of them?' Clothilde asked, with a hint of amusement.

'As many of them as possible, anyway,' Kasteen said.

Broklaw nodded, chewing, and swallowed hastily before chiming in too. 'Three million civilians is three million pieces of 'nid bait,' he said. 'The hive mind will already have sensed such a large concentration of biomass, and be preparing to assimilate it. If it hasn't attacked yet, it's only because it can't marshal a big enough force to be sure of breaking through our defences.'

'Is that all my people are to you, major?' Clothilde asked coolly. 'Potential fodder for the tyranids?'

Broklaw flushed. 'Of course not,' he said, 'but we have to remain aware of the strategic picture.'

'Spoken like a true soldier,' Clothilde said, with a smile, and Broklaw flushed again, realising for the first time that she was pulling his leg.

'Ruput has a point,' Kasteen said, loyally coming to the rescue of her subordinate, 'and so does Ciaphas. We've all fought the tyranids before, and the lessons we've learned were hard won.'

'I'm sure they were.' Clothilde took a delicate bite of her mushroom steak. 'But a mass evacuation on that scale would be impossible with the resources we have to hand. We're stretched to the limit as it is just clearing the non-combatants from the Barrens.' She paused to take a sip of wine. 'And the last thing we need at this stage is to spark a panic.'

I nodded, trying not to picture the effect an outbreak of civil unrest would have in the confines of a cavern city, and the dire consequences it would have on our state of readiness.

'Nonetheless,' I pointed out, 'the fewer innocent bystanders we have to protect when the las-bolts start flying, the better.' Izembard's dire prediction

was still fresh in my memory, and I could think of no reason to doubt it. 'If we could persuade some to leave of their own volition, that would be something.'

'It's possible, I suppose,' Clothilde conceded, nodding thoughtfully, and leaning across to refresh Broklaw's wine glass. We were all here to speak frankly, and that meant doing without the servants who'd normally take care of such niceties. 'The newsprints and pictcasts are reporting the existence of the swarm, but playing down the danger. I'll suggest they start being a bit less restrained, emphasise that the other provinces are safe, and let the proles work the rest out for themselves.'

'That should persuade some to get out while the going's good,' Kasteen said. 'And it might help if the locals start escorting the crawler convoys too. The last thing we need is the 'nids to massacre one while we're trying to convince the civilians to travel.'

'Good point,' I agreed.

'Any word on the reinforcements yet?' Clothilde asked, and Kasteen nodded.

'Another three regiments are on their way from Coronus. Two more Valhallan infantry ones, and some heavy armour to give the bigger beasties a hard time. If we can keep the outbreak confined to the Barrens until they get here, we might just have a chance.'

'There's a Space Marine strike cruiser inbound too,' I added, noticing the covert look which passed between Kasteen and Broklaw, who were well aware of my association with Amberley, and no doubt suspected I'd got her to pull some strings on our behalf; although on this occasion it appeared to be no more than a fortuitous coincidence<sup>94</sup>. 'From the Bone Knives Chapter. It seems they picked up our call for reinforcements, and are responding.'

'That's excellent news,' Clothilde said. 'How soon will they be here?'

Kasteen shrugged. 'In a month or so, Emperor willing.'

'I see.' The governor chewed another forkful of mushroom thoughtfully. 'Then let's hope we're still around to welcome them.'

As the following tension-filled days piled up to form a week, I began to hope that the governor would get her wish after all. The evacuation continued to run as smoothly as could be expected, snatching innumerable civilians, quite literally, from the jaws of death, while our forces fought a number of skirmishes which we hoped would prevent the disparate



segments of the swarm from joining up into a single unified force. Our own troopers had fought the 'nids often enough to know the value of keeping the neural net stretched thinly enough to knock the occasional hole in, and to my surprise the Nusquans seemed to be learning the lesson too, having sufficient sense to copy the tactics the Valhallans were using to such positive effect, instead of just charging in to get butchered as they had done against the orks.

Even more surprisingly, it seemed, we had Forres to thank for their change in attitude; though she was still gung-ho to the point of psychosis, at least from where I was standing, our little run-in with the 'nids in the agricave, and the scrap with the tervigon, seemed to have cured the delusion of immortality common to youngsters fresh out of the schola progenium, and her hard-won pragmatism was transmitting itself to the troopers under her care.

'Every life wasted on the battlefield is a victory to the Emperor's enemies,' I counselled, when we met one morning in the corridor leading to the conference room, in response to some fatuous platitude she'd just quoted about the nobility of sacrifice, and she looked at me a little strangely.

'I hadn't thought of it like that,' she said, then hesitated. 'May I speak frankly, commissar?'

'By all means, commissar,' I replied, amused by her formality.

'I believe I owe you an apology,' she said, taking me completely by surprise. 'In all honesty, when we first met, I thought your reputation must have been greatly exaggerated.'

'I knew we had to agree about something,' I said, inflecting the truth like a joke, and thereby reinforcing the impression of modesty that everyone seemed to have of me.

The corners of Forres's mouth quirked, before she hastily erased any sign of amusement. 'They used to tell us all about you at the schola progenium,' she said. 'Making you out to be some kind of ideal we should aspire to.'

'I wouldn't inflict that on anyone,' I said, equally truthfully.

'So when I met you in person,' Forres ploughed on, 'I suppose I was a bit disappointed. You just seemed a bit...'

'Human?' I suggested, and she nodded gravely. 'We all are,' I said. 'Guardsmen, militia, civilians...' I broke off, to nod a courteous greeting to Izembard. 'Even him, although he wouldn't thank you for saying so. That's

what makes us strong, and assures us of victory.'

'Yes. Well.' Forres shrugged. 'Just thought it needed saying, that's all.'

'I appreciate the thought,' I assured her. 'And your candour.' Which was all the more ironic, given the rote platitudes I'd just fobbed her off with. It seemed to work anyway; she gave me a tight little smile and went off to join the Nusquans in their corner of the room.

'Magos,' I said, as Izembard seemed to have interpreted my greeting as a desire for conversation, and lingered in my vicinity instead of taking his own seat at the table. 'Any developments that the rest of us should be aware of?'

'All in due time, commissar,' he chided. 'The Omnissiah reveals his secrets slowly. But one aspect of our work concerns you, in a way, so I suppose you may have an interest.'

'Me?' I asked, feeling as bewildered as you might expect. 'In what way?'

'The frozen tyranids you found,' Izembard buzzed. 'Our preliminary estimate of the time they've been entombed may have been in error.'

'Fascinating,' I said, trying to conceal my complete indifference to the topic, although had I realised the significance of what he was saying at the time I'm sure I'd have listened with a great deal more interest. 'How long have they been there then?'

'Considerably longer,' the tech-priest said. 'Although we are still attempting a more accurate determination, they could even pre-date the asteroidal impact which formed the geology of this region.'

'Bully for them,' I said. Rather more pressing from my point of view was the undeniable fact that the swarm was becoming more cohesive, and the tactics it employed more sophisticated, and I lost little time in saying as much as soon as the meeting started.

'We've seen this before,' Kasteen said confidently. 'The hive mind analyses the tactics being used against it, and modifies its own accordingly.'

'I would be inclined to agree,' Izembard said, 'were it not for the speed with which these changes are occurring. We're beginning to see separate sub-swarms coordinating their efforts, which would be far beyond the capabilities of the synapse creatures previously identified.'

'Then how are they doing it?' I asked, the familiar tingling sensation in the palms of my hands forewarning me of serious trouble to come.

'We hypothesise,' the magos said, after what seemed to me to be suspiciously like a pause for dramatic effect, 'that some major node of the

hive mind survived whatever catastrophe overwhelmed the lesser creatures, and lapsed into dormancy along with them. Now the increased synaptic activity among the neural net is causing it to revive, rallying the other bioforms.'

'You mean the bioship which brought them is waking up?' I asked, my stomach knotting at the thought.

Izembard nodded thoughtfully. 'It's possible,' he said, 'although if such a vessel were anywhere in the vicinity of Nusquam Fundumentibus it would almost certainly have revealed its presence by now. It's more likely that some fragment of it accompanied the other organisms to the surface.'

'Then we have to find it and kill it,' Kasteen said, her face pale even for an iceworlder, 'before it wakes completely. If it's that strong, it could start to call the fleet it originally came from.'

'And if it does that,' I concluded, 'we'll be facing a full scale invasion.'

We stared at one another, the full horrific implications sinking in. We knew from bitter experience that even a small splinter fleet could annihilate a world in a matter of weeks. With its relatively low, highly concentrated population, just a single fully functional bioship would probably be enough to lay waste to Nusquam Fundumentibus before the reinforcements we were expecting had time to arrive.

'Could it be lying low in the halo?' Forres asked. 'It would be almost impossible to find among the cometary debris.'

Broklaw shook his head. 'It would need to be a lot closer to maintain reliable contact with the swarm on the ground,' he pointed out. 'Perhaps it's in orbit, concealing itself somehow?'

'Hive ships are notoriously difficult to detect on auspex,' Izembard said, 'but there are no records of any managing to evade notice entirely at so close a range. The controlling intellect is almost certainly somewhere on the surface of Nusquam Fundumentibus.'

'If all the active 'nids are in the Leeward Barrens, then the hive node must be too,' I speculated aloud.

Izembard inclined his head. 'A reasonable inference,' he agreed. 'Although that still leaves a considerable area to cover.'

'Too big,' Kasteen said. 'We're spread far too thin already to mount a search on the ground, even if we knew what we were looking for.'

'What about aerial reconnaissance?' Brecca asked, and the senior defence force officer present shook her head.

‘All our aircraft are fully committed to the evacuation,’ she said. ‘We could redeploy them...’

‘No,’ Clothilde cut in, forcefully. ‘Getting the civilians out of danger has to be our highest priority.’

‘With respect, your Excellency,’ Forres said, ‘saving the planet should be our highest priority. Collateral damage is regrettable, of course, but...’

‘Then I suggest you find a way to achieve that without feeding my citizens to the first tyrannid organism that happens along,’ Clothilde replied, in a voice which brooked no argument.

‘Aerial reconnaissance probably won’t help much in any case,’ I said, in my most diplomatic manner; the last thing we needed now was to start bickering among ourselves. ‘Whatever this hive node is, it’s probably buried just as deeply as the rest of the ’nids.’

‘Then we’ll just have to hope someone spots them digging a hole,’ Kasteen said dryly, ‘in time to call in a bombing run.’

To my surprise, Izembard was nodding again. ‘That would probably work,’ he said. ‘Killing the primary node would, at the very least, severely disrupt the swarm. If we were particularly fortunate, the resulting psychic shock would incapacitate the majority of the subordinate organisms into the bargain.’

‘So how do we find it?’ I asked.

To my surprise Izembard shrugged, with the air of a man who only vaguely remembered how the gesture was performed. ‘Blind luck is somewhat beyond the scope of the Omnissiah,’ he said.

‘Luck works best if you make your own,’ I replied, trying to sound confident, but in truth I was anything but. If Izembard was right about the existence of a higher coordinating intelligence, then the swarm was infinitely more dangerous than we’d believed.



*Editorial Note:*

*While the Imperial Guard braced itself for further attacks from a foe which now appeared even more formidable than they'd believed, the efforts Governor Striebgriebeling had initiated to persuade the civilian population of Primadelving that it would be better off away from the firing line continued. Though only a relatively small proportion of the total number heeded the carefully dropped hints, a steady trickle of refugees began to make their way to other cavern cities; which, though relieving the pressure a little in the capital, began to create administrative difficulties of its own in the other population centres.*

*This selection of extracts from the printsheets and other sources should give something of the flavour of the efforts to influence the most footloose among the citizenry to leave.*

From *The Nusquan Diurnal Journal*, 373 942.M41

XENOS INCURSIONS INCREASE

*Governor calls for calm.*

Despite the best efforts of the planetary defence force and the recently arrived Imperial Guard units to defend them, reports are continuing to come in of outlying settlements throughout the Leeward Barrens falling victim to the depredations of the tyranids. Though efforts to evacuate the civilians

most at risk continues, further casualties seem inevitable before the xenos interlopers can be dispatched.

Noting that the vast majority of those rescued are being taken, not to Primadelving, as would seem most reasonable under the circumstances, but to cities in other provinces, it is not hard to conclude that the planetary capital itself is considered vulnerable to the xenos horde, speculation which Governor Striebriegbling did little to play down in her most recent address.

‘We must all remain steadfast and vigilant,’ she told the Delegate Assembly, ‘even where safety seems most assured. The tyranids undoubtedly pose a potent and terrible threat. We must not, however, allow blind panic to dictate our actions, but proceed in a calm and rational manner to ensure our safety.’

From *The Solar*, 373 942.M41

### THOUSANDS FLEE RAVENING XENOS!

The full horror faced by desperate snowsteads<sup>95</sup> became clear this morning, with the arrival in Primadelving of the survivors of a tyranid attack on the village of Eastridge. Over half the population were slaughtered by the ravening beasts, before a detachment from the 597th Valhallan could respond to their vox messages pleading for help.

‘It was a nightmare,’ ice filtration artisan Jezeba Cleff told us. ‘They were ripping people to bits and eating them wherever you looked. All we could save of my gran was her specs.’

‘The Barrens aren’t a fit place to bring up kids in now,’ her husband added. ‘We’re moving on to Polatropolis as soon as Jezeba can line up a job.’

(Exclusive pics, pages 3,5,6 and 8. Comment & cartoon, page 2. ‘Don’t panic,’ says Governor, page 7.)

From *The Nusquan Diurnal Journal*, 376 942.M41

### WESTERMINE BOOM BRINGS JOB OPPORTUNITIES

Rapid growth in the economy of Westermine, fuelled by the recent completion of new starport facilities second only to those of Primadelving, has led to a critical skills shortage in this burgeoning metropolis. Wages

have risen sharply as a result, with some skilled artisans seeing as much as a thirty per cent increase in their incomes, making them noticeably better off than those doing the same job in Primadelving. Despite the greater costs involved, many businesses remain desperate to take on staff, and are pinning their hopes on a fresh influx of workers from the Leeward Barrens, where the tyranid and greenskin incursions are causing some disruption to traditional patterns of employment.

Extract from a pictcast by Governor Striebgriehling, 387 942.M41.

The evacuation of the Leeward Barrens has been a remarkable success, with uncounted numbers of innocent lives preserved from the tyranid menace. But let us not forget the heroic sacrifice of so many members of the Imperial Guard and the planetary defence force which has made this possible. Even now they are engaging ever-growing numbers of these obscene and deadly creatures, which, deprived of the easy prey they had hoped to consume, must surely be seeking fresh victims.

Primadelving remains a well-defended refuge, but this is no time for complacency. Many of the creatures among the swarm are skilled at infiltration, and must surely be testing our fortifications, hoping to find a way in. Remain vigilant, and report anything out of the ordinary to the appropriate authorities at once.

Remember, you are our first line of defence.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## TWENTY

‘I think the troopers out on the ice might disagree with that,’ I said. ‘Surely they’re our first line of defence?’

Clothilde had just made some remark in a pictcast which effectively told the civilians skulking in the warmth and comfort of Primadelving that they were just as much in the firing line as the men and women fighting for their lives in the frozen wilderness, and even allowing for the hyperbole I’d normally expect in such a speech, that had struck me as a trifle inconsiderate. The governor looked at me across the hololith in the command centre, as her projected image faded, a curious expression on her face.

‘I take your point,’ she said, ‘and I don’t mean to play down the heroism of anyone out there facing the tyranids. But you know as well as I do that it’s only a matter of time before they attack the city.’ We all glanced at the display, where a chain of contact icons formed an ever-tightening noose around our collective neck. ‘It’s getting harder and harder to keep the crawler routes open; the more citizens we can persuade to leave before they’re severed the better, and a little judicious scaremongering should help to get a few more moving.’

‘Besides, it’s a fair point,’ Kasteen conceded, much to my surprise. ‘Sooner or later we’re going to see a lictor or a genestealer brood sneaking past our defences, and when that happens we’re going to need all the eyes we can get.’

‘There might be such a thing as too many,’ I said, turning back to



Clothilde. ‘If we’re going to lose the crawler routes soon, then we need to get a proper evacuation under way as quickly as possible. I understand your reluctance, but...’

‘No,’ she said flatly, ‘I don’t believe you do. This may be an abstract tactical problem to you, but to me it’s the lives and homes of millions of people who put their trust in the Emperor, and in me as His official representative. Abandoning the capital would be like turning our backs on all the Imperium stands for.’

‘With all due respect, your Excellency,’ Forres said, chiming in equally unexpectedly, ‘we can defend all the Imperium stands for far more effectively without millions of civilians blocking our fire lanes, and being devoured wholesale so the tyranids can spawn. Emperor knows how many reinforcements. Now the Barrens have been cleared, and we have the resources available, we should begin evacuating the city at once.’

‘Well said, commissar,’ I put in, happy to let someone else draw the ire of a hacked-off planetary governor (which in my experience could be quite formidable, especially if they turned out to be a genestealer hybrid, or a gibbering madman with a personal retinue of daemons, as had happened on a couple of memorable occasions in the past).

Clothilde looked at Brecca, and the local contingent, no doubt hoping to find some support for her position there, but found none; all were looking at Forres, clearly in complete agreement.

Kasteen coughed delicately. ‘If you feel unable to give the order,’ she said, ‘perhaps it would be a good time to bring the province under the direct protection of His Divine Majesty’s armed forces.’

Clothilde looked at her in open incredulity. ‘Are you threatening me with some kind of *coup d’etat*?’ she demanded.

‘By no means,’ I said, as diplomatically as I could, which was quite a lot given the practice I’d had over the years. ‘Colonel Kasteen is simply pointing out that the most senior Imperial Guard officer present is entitled to declare martial law if a state of civil emergency exists, and if the planetary authorities are failing to respond in a timely and appropriate manner.’ I inflected the phrase to sound as though I was quoting, although the actual wording of the appropriate regulation was far more syntactically mangled, and I couldn’t recall it in that much detail anyway. ‘Technically, that’s subject to ratification by the most senior member of the Commissariat available<sup>96</sup>,’ I added as an afterthought, a requirement presumably intended

to rein in any Guard officers fancying a career change to governor, 'but as the most senior commissar on Nusquam Fundamentibus is me, and I trust the colonel's judgement implicitly, we can take that as read.'

'But she isn't the most senior Imperial Guard officer,' Clothilde said, with the air of a regicide player unexpectedly taking the king. 'Colonel Brecca is of equal rank.'

'Colonel Kasteen has several years seniority, which makes her the ranking officer nevertheless,' I pointed out. 'And a gun. Both of which enable her to declare martial law right now, with, for the record, my full approval, should she see the need.'

Kasteen caught my eye, signalling her gratitude for my support with a barely perceptible nod. 'Are we all agreed on the necessity of an immediate evacuation, then?' she asked.

'We are,' Clothilde said tightly, after a fractional pause.

'Then I'd say the civil authorities are responding appropriately,' Kasteen said, looking distinctly relieved. 'For the time being, anyway.'

'I'm not sure this is a good time to be making an enemy of the governor,' Broklaw said, when we filled him in on the events of the last meeting. His face was still reddened from the driving sleet on the surface, where he'd been supervising the construction of a ring of new defences around the perimeter of the city, and he'd clearly been enjoying the jaunt among the snowdrifts the job had afforded him. 'But under the circumstances, it doesn't sound as though you had much choice.'

'I'm afraid we didn't,' I said. 'The last thing we need is... what was the phrase you used?'

'"Three million pieces of 'noid bait getting in the way,"' Kasteen supplied helpfully, while Broklaw grinned at the good-natured leg-pulling.

'Exactly,' I said. 'I'm sure she won't bear a grudge, once she's had a chance to think things through.'

'I hope not,' Kasteen said, flinching a little as Jurgen passed close enough to hand her a steaming tanna bowl. 'It'd be a pain in the arse having to shift our command post at this stage.' She glanced round my office, paying particular attention to the opulent drawing room furnishings I'd found on moving in, and which I'd promptly had pushed back to the walls to make room for my desk. Accepting the governor's hospitality had been convenient when we first arrived, but that could turn out to be highly

problematic if we fell out with her.

Broklaw took his tanna gratefully, warming his hands around it, before sipping the fragrant liquid. 'I don't see the problem,' he said. 'If she gets difficult, declare martial law anyway, and let Ciaphas threaten to shoot her again.'

'I did nothing of the kind,' I said, accepting my inevitable share of the ribbing<sup>97</sup>. 'I just pointed out that Regina was carrying a gun.'

'Which could so easily have escaped her notice,' Kasteen said dryly. 'Anyway, we made our point. The evacuation order's been issued.' She spoke with some relief, which I must confess I shared. Putting Primadelving under martial law would have saddled us with innumerable responsibilities connected with its governance, which in turn would have impeded our efforts to deal with the tyranid problem almost as much as leaving the civilians underfoot.

'Will that be all, sir?' Jurgen asked, handing me the last of the tanna bowls from the tray he carried.

After a moment's consideration, I nodded. 'It will,' I confirmed. The main reason for holding our meeting in my office was the near certainty that we wouldn't be interrupted once he resumed his post in its anteroom, deflecting all but the most urgent petitioners with his habitual mixture of obstructive politeness and near-lethal flatulence.

'The big question is how many of the civvies we can get out before the overland routes become too dangerous for the crawlers,' Kasteen said. 'Once we're restricted to aircraft, we're frakked.'

Broklaw and I nodded thoughtfully. The pitifully few aircraft the Nusquans had available would be wholly inadequate for the task of moving so many people, even if the atrocious weather on the surface didn't keep them grounded half the time<sup>98</sup>.

'We'll need to requisition everything we can get our hands on,' I said. 'Cargo crawlers as well as passenger vehicles.' The memory of the steady stream of profanity which had accompanied our abortive journey back from the agricaves flashed across my mind. 'It won't be comfortable, but it'll be better than ending up as 'nid rations.'

'We'll need to protect the convoys too,' Broklaw pointed out. 'They're far too vulnerable on their own, and as soon as the 'nids realise there are large numbers of people moving across the ice they'll be down on them like eldar reivers.'

‘I know.’ Kasteen looked troubled. ‘We can send a few squads along in Chimeras, but they’ll find it heavy going in these conditions. If we’re not careful the crawlers will outpace them.’

‘The Sentinels might be better,’ I suggested. ‘They’re fast and agile enough to keep the convoy together, and they’ve got enough firepower to bring down one of the really big ones if the ’nids decide they’re going to play rough.’

‘They might,’ Kasteen agreed, ‘if we had enough walkers to do the job. But we’ll need a couple of squadrons at least to protect just one convoy, let alone the number that’ll be leaving.’

‘I’ll liaise with the militia,’ Broklaw promised. ‘They’ve got a lot of Sentinels for hit and run raids against the orks. The Nusquans have a troop too, although how many of them are left by now is anybody’s guess.’

Before I could formulate an adequate response to that, I became aware of raised voices from the anteroom where Jurgen was now lurking; although, to be more accurate, I was able to distinguish one raised voice in particular, unmistakably feminine, my aide no doubt responding in the same phlegmatic manner in which he dealt with most attempts to get past him. His doggedly polite obstructiveness had reduced generals to apoplexy before now, but this particular interloper was evidently made of sterner stuff. With a ringing declaration of ‘Well, he’ll see me!’ the door to my office shivered on its hinges, revealing the not entirely unexpected silhouette of a young woman in a Commissarial greatcoat.

‘Commissar Forbes,’ I said, determined to appear unconcerned. ‘An unexpected pleasure. Jurgen, could you find the commissar a tanna?’

‘Of course, sir,’ my aide said, hovering on the threshold, evidently relieved to find the problem somebody else’s now, despite the glower he directed at Forbes’s oblivious back as she strode into the room. He dropped his voice. ‘I’m sorry sir, she just barged right past me. Nothing I could do to stop her, short of opening fire.’ An option he found distinctly appealing, judging by his expression as he glanced in the young woman’s direction again.

‘You weren’t to blame,’ I assured him. ‘I doubt the Emperor Himself could have slowed that one down.’

‘Probably not, sir,’ he agreed, somewhat mollified, and went off in search of refreshment for our unexpected guest.

‘You need to see this,’ Forbes said, without any preamble, and dropped a data-slate on my desk. Kasteen picked it up and activated it, while Broklaw

and I moved round to get a clearer view. 'It went out on all the pict channels about ten minutes ago.'

Clothilde's face appeared, in mid-speech, and I glanced questioningly at Forres. 'Shouldn't we have started at the beginning?'

The young commissar shook her head. 'It's just the usual platitudes,' she assured me. 'This is the important bit.'

'I have accordingly,' Clothilde said, with exaggerated gravitas, 'and with a heavy heart, decided to transfer responsibility for this great and grave undertaking to those most capable of shouldering it. Commissar Cain's renown as a staunch defender of the Imperial virtues is too great for his advice to be casually disregarded, however much it may go against my own inclinations. The evacuation effort will therefore be carried out under the jurisdiction of the planetary defence force, and I urge all loyal citizens to cooperate fully with our gallant defenders.'

'And so on, and so forth, *ad frakking nauseum*,' Forres said, cutting off the recording, the first time I could recall hearing her swear, or seeing her angry enough to do so.

'She's outflanked us,' I said, torn between annoyance and amusement. 'Regina can't declare martial law if she's already done it herself.'

'The difference is, she's in charge of the defence force<sup>99</sup>,' Forres pointed out. 'She can drag her heels and obstruct the evacuation all she likes now, and there's nothing we can do about it.'

'We may not have to,' I said. 'The militia have been up at the sharp end enough to appreciate just how big a threat the tyranids are. My guess is they'll do the best job they can, whether the governor likes it or not.'

'Which begs the question of whether their best will be good enough,' Broklaw said, forthright as always. 'It'll be a logistical nightmare, and they're not exactly Guard calibre, are they?'

'We could offer to assist,' Kasteen said thoughtfully. 'Sulla would keep them up to the mark. But if the 'nids attack, we'll need her snowside more than we do shuffling data-slates.'

'Sounds like a job for a commissar,' I said, glancing meaningfully at Forres.

She nodded thoughtfully, beginning to calm down as she considered the implications. 'That's true,' she said, looking a good deal happier than when she'd come in. She even took the tanna bowl Jurgen somewhat sullenly offered her without flinching. 'And with you looking over their shoulders

they shouldn't screw things up too much.'

'Me?' I said, surprised. 'I thought with your experience of working with Nusquans, you'd be the obvious choice.' And too busy to get in my way for the foreseeable future, more to the point.

'But you're a Hero of the Imperium,' Kasteen pointed out, not quite managing to hide her amusement. 'Hearing you're in charge will reassure the civvies far more than a commissar they've never heard of before, and that means they'll be a lot more inclined to do as they're told.'

'Good point,' I agreed, considering the matter. My inflated reputation had evidently preceded me here, as it tended to do pretty much anywhere I'd visited<sup>100</sup>, particularly the part I was popularly supposed to have played in the first campaign against the orks; it wouldn't take much to turn that to my advantage in dealing with the locals. Not to mention the fact that as long as I was herding as many of them as possible on to the crawlers, no one could reasonably expect me to lead a do-or-die charge against the 'nids.

'You'll do it then?' Forres asked, not quite concealing her eagerness to leave the job in the hands of a dull old fogey like me, while she scampered off to save the galaxy from the terror of the hive mind. I found myself wondering for a moment if I'd ever been that young and impetuous, before deciding that no, I hadn't; which was more than a little ironic, given the way trouble had insisted on following me around regardless.

'I suppose I'd better,' I said, with as much reluctance as I could manage to feign. 'Someone has to, and, as you say, I seem to have something of a public profile already. We might as well make use of that if we can.'

'We're agreed, then,' Kasteen said. 'Ciaphas herds the proles, while the rest of us get back to the war.'

'Good luck with that,' I said, quietly enjoying the stunned expression which had flickered over Forres's face at the casual use of my given name. 'May the Emperor walk with you.'

'And with you,' Forres said, responding automatically, as though she was still in the schola chapel. At the time I took it as a mere reflexive pleasantry, but in retrospect I was to find I needed all the help the Golden Throne could give me.



## TWENTY-ONE

At first, I must admit, my new responsibilities were far from onerous. My inflated reputation performed its usual trick of predisposing most of the people I had contact with to listen to me without arguing too much; particularly the civilians, who generally swallowed the modest hero pose wholesale. The militia were even more susceptible, if that were possible, since, even if they were unimpressed by my widely-credited triumphs, there were still my sash and greatcoat to consider, not to mention the sidearms that went with them; and, in my experience, being allowed to shoot anyone who disagrees with you tends to persuade them of the validity of your viewpoint with remarkably little difficulty<sup>101</sup>. Though the average citizen was as reluctant as you might expect to pack up her husband and children and abandon their home, the prospect of being consumed by tyranids was even less appealing, so many more than I'd expected turned up at the crawler park when directed to do so. There were the inevitable exceptions, however, which caused us a few headaches, even after I'd authorised the release of some appropriately grisly picts of tyranid attacks to the public news channels.

'The problem,' I said candidly, in one of my periodic meetings with the governor, 'is you. Not in any personal way, of course, but as long as you remain adamant about remaining in Primadelving, there are always going to be civilians who insist on following your example.'

'I'm sure there are,' Clothilde said, smiling graciously at me. She didn't seem to be holding a grudge about losing control of the evacuation effort,

and the opportunity to disrupt it, if that had really been her agenda<sup>102</sup>; but I'd spent long enough around politicians not to let my guard down anyway, just in case. 'But I'm not budging. You've been in enough war zones to know what happens if the governor flees. Panic, disorder, looting and anarchy. While I stay, the rule of the Imperium remains solid.'

We were meeting in one of the outer rooms of her personal quarters, which, though physically connected to the areas of the palace complex given over to the 597th by broad, well-lit tunnels, might just as well have been on another planet. (Where, incidentally, most of the furnishings appeared to have originated.) Like most of the palaces I'd visited over the years, opulence seemed to count for more than good taste in the selection of decor, but at least this example seemed relatively restrained in that regard; provided you were able to ignore the gilded cherubs which leered at you from every conceivable surface.

'Up to a point,' I said. 'But the big difference is that you've got a personal shuttle standing by to get you out of here if the 'nids break through. The civilians haven't.' As I spoke, the beginnings of an idea began to stir, but before I could bring it into focus Clothilde banged her tea bowl down on the table next to her, with scant regard for either marquetry or porcelain.

'Then I suggest you prevent the tyrannids from getting in,' she said peremptorily, as if that was simply a matter of bolting a couple of doors, or telling them firmly to go away. 'What are you doing about the citizens who refuse to leave?'

'There's not much we can do,' I admitted, 'other than try to persuade them.' Forres had suggested simply arresting the non-compliers, and marching them aboard a crawler at gunpoint, but appealing as the idea was in the abstract, I'd been forced to veto it on the grounds of practicality. The resulting resentment would, at best, make everyone's jobs considerably more difficult, and more than likely spark off precisely the kind of civil unrest we most feared, diverting troopers and resources from the urgent business of defending against the swarm.

'And how do you propose to do that?' Clothilde asked, as if the question were merely an academic one.

I shrugged. 'In all honesty,' I admitted, 'I haven't a clue.'

'Then you need to find out why they're not going,' the governor said. 'They can't all be staying put just because I am.'

'Not all,' I admitted. 'Some are reluctant to leave their homes because



they're afraid of looters, and some don't believe the tyrannids can be as dangerous as they are. Most of them are just afraid to make the journey, though, and in all honesty I can't blame them. We've only had three convoys attacked so far, and the escorts drove them off easily enough, but that's how the hive mind works; every failure will have taught it a little more about our weapons and tactics, and it'll refine its strategy until it comes up with one that succeeds. When it does...' I shrugged. 'There won't be any more convoys. Everyone still in Primadelving will be stuck here, waiting for the main attack.' Including me, which wasn't a comfortable prospect.

'I see.' Clothilde nodded thoughtfully, and reached for some sticky confection in a cut glass dish. 'Then it seems to me that you need to find a way of persuading people to follow your lead before it's too late.'

'It's a simple matter of psychology,' I said, huddling deeper into my greatcoat as the bone-chilling cold whistled in through the thick outer doors of the main crawler park. The cavern was close enough to the surface to be hewn from solid ice, rather than the bedrock beneath, and although it was a good deal warmer than the snowfields above, it seemed chilly enough to me. The iceworlders milling around the wide open space seemed to consider it almost tropical, though, their coats and jackets unfastened as they clambered aboard the promethium-spewing vehicles crowding the cavern, shepherded by grim-faced militia troopers. 'If they see me going along, they'll think there's nothing to worry about.'

'I see.' Sulla nodded, her own greatcoat folded casually over one arm, her vaguely equine features alight with her manifest eagerness to be away from here, and preferably shooting at something. Just my luck that, in an attempt to make use of her logistical expertise without pulling her out of the front line entirely, Kasteen had assigned her company to oversee the security of the convoys; and that, in an excess of enthusiasm by no means unusual, she seemed to have decided to take command of this particular one herself<sup>103</sup>. 'You want to convince them it's safe.'

'Safer than staying here, anyway,' I agreed. The tyrannid swarms were circling the city more tightly than ever, and we could only count on a few more convoys getting through before their cordon became impenetrable. So far we'd been damnably lucky, getting around a hundred thousand people away through the gaps in their envelopment, but those were narrowing all

the time; and I had no doubt that if it hadn't been for the number of recon flights being flown by the local pilots, far fewer groups of refugees would have been able to avoid them.

'We'll get you through,' Sulla said, with complete conviction. 'And back in one piece.'

'I've no doubt you will,' I replied, although in all honesty the notion of returning to face an army of tyranids once I'd evaded their clutches was far from appealing. I was pretty sure I could find some urgent reason to remain at our destination, however, at least until the worst of the fighting had died down. Admitting as much out loud would hardly fit the image of imperturbable courage I'd had foisted upon me, and which I was forced to work so hard to maintain, however, so I simply let my hands drift down to rest on my weapons for a moment, and adopted a look of quiet resolution, as though I couldn't wait to start using them again.

To my complete lack of surprise, Sulla bought it, simply gazing at me in the vaguely vacant fashion I was so familiar with, a faint smile on her face, before snapping a salute of parade-ground crispness and turning away to go and bother somebody else. The reason for her abrupt departure manifested itself a moment later, preceded by the odour of well-matured socks.

'Sorry to keep you waiting, sir,' Jurgen said, his voice emerging from the narrow strip of psoriasis visible between the pulled-down brim of his bulky fur hat and the turned-up collar of his greatcoat. 'I was just making a flask for the journey. Thought you might need it.'

'I probably will,' I agreed, suppressing another shiver as the keen wind found a hitherto unseen chink in my multiple layers of clothing. 'But not as much as that, if things turn ploin-shaped.' The reassuring bulk of his melta was slung across his back, next to the more slender silhouette of his lasgun, and my aide patted it almost affectionately.

'Then let's hope it doesn't,' he said, turning to clear a path for me through the small knot of pictcasters and printsheet scribes standing between me and the crawler which, according to plan anyway, was to be our home for the next thirty-two hours<sup>104</sup>. Remembering the purpose of the exercise, I paused to give them a platitude or two, and strike some suitably dramatic poses for the imagifiers, before escaping gratefully into the vehicle I'd selected; a venerable, but comfortably appointed, snowliner, which, though crowded far beyond the imagination of its designer, still afforded a measure of luxury – at least compared to banging about in the back of a cargo hauler.

As well as comfortably padded seats, into which Jurgen and I sank gratefully, the passenger crawler had the inestimable advantage of large windows, affording an uninterrupted view of the surrounding landscape, which would at least enable me to see what was about to try to kill me before it did. Though I had no intention of letting anything get close enough to make the attempt, of course.

At length, the rumbling of engines rose to a level which drowned out all other ambient noise, and, with a lurch, we were underway, grinding up the ramp of compacted ice leading to the world outside.

Just as I had when we were escaping the agricave aboard the requisitioned crawler we'd so fortuitously discovered there, I found the sight of the frozen landscape around us a fascinating novelty. This time the sun was low on the horizon, painting the snows around us the colour of blood, and I found myself shuddering, not entirely from the residual chill forcing its way through the thick slab of glazing material. I can't deny, however, that it also possessed a disturbing beauty, the westering sun striking highlights from the hard edges of the partially buried structures which occasionally broke the surface of the snow<sup>105</sup>, and scintillating through the larger blocks of ice which bordered the track we were traversing<sup>106</sup>.

'Escorts forming up,' Sulla told me, her voice echoing faintly in my comm-bead; turning my head a little, I could see Shambas's Sentinels bounding among the larger vehicles, uncannily reminiscent of ovinehounds herding a flock, while a couple of our Chimeras kept pace along the flanks, at least for the time being. (Despite Broklaw's best efforts, there simply hadn't been enough Sentinels to go round, so we were just having to make the best of what we'd got: if the Chimeras had a problem keeping up with the broader-tracked crawlers, the whole convoy simply slowed down to accommodate them.) I was able to distinguish Sulla's command vehicle easily by the distinctive vox and auspex arrays sprouting from it; her head and shoulders were protruding from the turret, and she waved cheerfully at me, before moving up past a battered-looking cargo hauler festooned with towing chains and lashed-on barrels of promethium, its silhouette so obscured by the encrustation of stowage that it put me in mind of the orkish contraptions we'd seen after our precipitous arrival. The rickety vehicle looked like an accident in search of someone to happen to, and I breathed thanks to the Throne that I was able to make the trip in comparative comfort.

‘I see you,’ I responded calmly, while continuing to look all around us for the first sign of hostile movement. It was a bit early for that, of course, but under the circumstances, I felt, a little paranoia certainly couldn’t hurt. ‘Anything on the auspex?’

‘Nothing but friendlies,’ Sulla assured me, although if I hadn’t been sure of that, I’d never have begun this trip in the first place. The Valkyries were continuing to fly sorties over the convoy routes and the major concentrations of tyrannids, and their pilots hadn’t seen anything close enough to our intended line of travel to afford any serious concern. Nevertheless, I remained ill at ease, obscurely convinced that I’d missed something; tyrannids should never be underestimated, I’d learned that the hard way.

‘Let’s hope it stays that way,’ I said, although of course it didn’t.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



*Editorial Note:*

*Cain's casual mention of his mode of transport, and occasional details in the subsequent part of his narrative, don't make it entirely clear how much the passenger vehicles which plied between cities on Nusquam Fundumentibus differed from their more utilitarian, and generally smaller, cargo-carrying cousins.*

*Accordingly, the following extract has been inserted here, in the hope that it may prove illuminating.*

From *Interesting Places and Tedious People: A Wanderer's Waybook*, by Jerval Sekara, 145.M39.

Given the abominable climate, the only practical manner of visiting centres of population, other than the one at which the shuttle bearing the curious wayfarer may have landed, is by means of the snowliners which ply between them on a regular basis. These are large and comfortable enough to be tolerable for all but the longest of journeys, being typically arranged on three decks: the lowest devoted to the engine, promethium tanks, and stowage for the luggage of passengers; the middle to seating, of variable comfort depending on price, and the sleeping compartments which long distance travellers would do well to avail themselves of, despite their rudimentary nature; and the upper to an observation lounge, from which the landscape may be observed for as long as it remains of interest, along with dining areas offering basic sustenance of one sort or another.

Needless to say, a plentiful supply of reading matter is essential.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## TWENTY-TWO

By the time darkness fell, I have to confess, the novelty of the landscape had begun to pall. No doubt my travelling companions, Valhallans and Nusquans alike, were able to distinguish subtle beauties in the endless vista of ice and snow which had escaped me, but I was finding it increasingly dull; and the slow encroachment of night brought its own worries. Every patch of deeper darkness could conceal a tyrannid, and I kept an anxious vigil, despite the periodic bursts of conversation in my comm-bead which assured me that our escort remained alert, and that so far there was no sign of the ambush I dreaded.

By great good fortune, the clouds which obscured most of the sky for so much of the time had parted, allowing the faint bluish radiance of the stars to shimmer from the ice around us, every surface reflecting and refracting the glory of the heavens. This was supplemented by a more diffuse yellowish glow, which puzzled me for a while, Nusquam Fundamentibus being devoid of a moon, until I discerned a point of light in the sky far brighter than the stars surrounding it; then the coin dropped. The orbital docks we'd come so close to obliterating in our headlong plunge from the empyrean were large enough, and in a low enough orbit, to reflect a little of the sunlight they caught to the planet below.

Though this was sufficient to prevent the darkness around us from becoming entirely stygian, it left far too many patches of utter blackness, in which anything might lurk, for my peace of mind, and I was heartily glad to see the bright beams of the searchlights mounted on our Chimeras and

Sentinels swinging constantly around us, ever alert for any threats.

None came, of course, and the weary, sleepless night dragged on. A few times I rose from my seat, hoping to restore some vestiges of circulation to my lower limbs, but movement was all but impossible; the snowliner had been built to carry around a hundred people in reasonable comfort, but was now jammed with nearly three times that number, so even a visit to the head involved negotiating an obstacle course of bodies and belongings which choked the aisles. Reaching the upper deck would have been completely impossible, even if there was anything to be gained by making the attempt, the refreshment facilities which would normally have been there having been ripped out to make room for more passengers. This left us reliant for sustenance on the supplies Jurgen had secreted about his person, with his usual diligence; Guard-issue ration bars, with their usual lingering flavour of nothing identifiable, washed down with a more than welcome flask of tanna.

At that, I suppose, we did better than many of the poor wretches surrounding us, who appeared to have brought nothing at all to keep them going. To my carefully concealed relief, none of the refugees made any attempt to engage us in conversation; no doubt due to Jurgen's miasma, which I'm bound to note became progressively less noticeable as the hours passed and the fetor of so many bodies in such close proximity began to grow, and to the weapons we both carried so openly<sup>107</sup>.

At length, dawn began to break over the desolate landscape, the rising sun once again washing the snowfields in a vaguely sinister crimson glow. As I yawned, regarding it balefully, one of the outcrops of ice in the middle distance suddenly crumbled, sliding gently to the ground beneath it in a cascade of glittering crystals.

'Did you see that?' I asked Jurgen, who for some time had been fully occupied in picking his nose.

'See what, sir?' he asked, raising his eyes from the porno slate he'd been reading in a faintly desultory fashion.

Before I could elaborate, Sulla's voice burst into my comm-bead. 'We've got ground shocks, incoming,' she told me, the shiver of excitement at the prospect of action I'd learned to dread not quite suppressed in her clipped, professional tones. 'Reads like a burrower.'

'What kind?' I asked, with an apprehensive look at the frozen landscape beyond the window. I rose to my feet, and craned my neck, hoping for a



better view.

‘Can’t tell yet,’ Sulla said, ‘but it looks like it’s alone at any rate.’

‘Another probe,’ I said, beginning to relax a little. We might still be in for a fight, most of the tyrannid burrowers being huge and well armoured, but at least it wouldn’t be an all out attack, and once our escorts were in a position to concentrate their fire it wouldn’t last long. ‘Testing our defences again.’

‘That’s how I read it,’ Sulla agreed.

Before I could reply, the entire snowliner lurched beneath my feet, eliciting cries of alarm from the civilians surrounding us; a chorus of apprehension I’d have been happy to join in with if it hadn’t been for my audience<sup>108</sup>. A moment later, something huge reared up beyond the window, thick plates of chitin encasing a serpentine body a couple of metres or more thick, before a head like a daemon’s nightmare smashed into the glaze. I stumbled back, impeded by the chair behind me, as razor-sharp shards of the stuff fell all around where I was standing, and drew my laspistol reflexively.

‘Frak off!’ I shouted, the sudden influx of freezing air almost as keen as the fragments of the window, and cracked off a few futile shots, which impacted harmlessly on the armour of the monstrous creature before me as it reared back and prepared to strike again. ‘It’s just surfaced!’ I added, over the vox-net.

‘Acknowledged,’ Sulla said crisply. ‘Surround and engage,’ and an encouraging number of Valhallan voices assured her of their intention to comply with the instruction as rapidly as possible.

‘I can’t get a shot, sir,’ Jurgen said apologetically, ‘you’re in the way.’ Which was where it looked as though I was staying, unless the ghastly thing ate me, as I couldn’t get through the seats hemming me in on either side, or back past my aide to safety. A mouth wide enough to swallow me whole swooped in my direction, surrounded by far too many fangs and tusks, and impelled by instinct I jumped through the gaping hole in the ruined window, the only avenue of escape left open to me.

For a moment I thought I’d left it too late, dooming myself to a lingering and agonising demise as the giant worm’s stomach acid slowly digested me<sup>109</sup>, but I missed its strike by a hairsbreadth, or so it seemed to me, ending up winded and gasping in a snowbank some three metres below. A bright flash behind me, a roar of pain and frustration and the stench of charring flesh was enough to tell me that Jurgen had taken full advantage of the

sudden clearing of his sight line, and the creature reared back again, shaking its head and bellowing.

‘Commissar! Can you hear me?’ my aide asked, sounding remarkably agitated, even for a man who’s just potted a gigantic carnivorous worm at point-blank range, and it belatedly occurred to me that perhaps he attributed my sudden disappearance to having been eaten.

‘Loud and clear,’ I assured him. ‘Just getting my breath back.’ Not to mention my wits; a moment later I was forced to scuttle deeper under the belly of the snowliner to avoid being mashed into the snow by one of its track assemblies, which rumbled past on guide wheels taller than I was. ‘Where’s the ’nid?’

‘Burrowing again,’ Jurgen said. ‘Maybe I scared it off.’

‘Maybe,’ I said. And maybe the Traitor Legions would come to their senses, renounce the Ruinous Powers, and return to the light of the Emperor, which seemed almost equally likely.

‘They hunt by vibration,’ Sulla reminded me, as though that were something liable to have slipped my mind under the circumstances. ‘It’ll be homing in on your footfalls.’

And it would have headed straight for the biggest source of noise and vibration in the convoy too, of course, which meant it would keep coming back to the snowliner until we somehow managed to get rid of it.

Unnecessary as Sulla’s advice had been, it was sound enough. I needed to get off the snow, and fast. Seeing a step on the side of the track assembly which had so recently almost reduced me to an unpleasant stain, apparently there to facilitate maintenance while the huge vehicle was at rest, I broke into a sprint, managing to catch it up in a handful of strides; after which it was only a moment’s work to scramble up to a narrow metal walkway, in uncomfortable proximity to far too much machinery capable of ripping me to shreds if I fell into it. Almost as soon as I’d reached the dubious sanctuary, I noticed a rippling in the ice below, exactly where I’d been standing a few seconds before; then a huge fanged maw appeared, snapping disappointedly for a moment, before sinking again, once more lost to view. Abruptly reminded of the narrowness of my escape, I felt a shiver pass through me unconnected with the bone-chilling cold.

‘It just broke surface under the snowliner,’ I said, warning the escorts as best I could. The most disconcerting thing about this particular subspecies of tyranid was its ability to strike upwards from below without warning, and

when it did so it could easily cripple a vehicle, tearing the tracks to pieces, and ripping through the relatively thin armour of the floor to get at the crew inside. Fortunately, the hulking passenger crawler seemed too big for it to try the trick on, its great bulk and low centre of mass making it almost impossible to turn over. Which didn't mean it wouldn't have better luck with one of the other crawlers in the convoy, of course; fortunately it was acting entirely on instinct, lacking the intelligence to work that out for itself. The only thing capable of diverting its attention would be the distinctive vibrations of potential prey on foot, as I'd just come so close to demonstrating.

Then something odd about the situation struck me. This would be a pretty pointless test of our defences if there wasn't a synapse creature somewhere around to relay the news of the burrower's success or failure back to the hive mind for evaluation. 'Captain,' I said, 'there must be something else close by, pulling this one's strings. Stay alert.'

'We will,' Sulla assured me, no doubt convinced that my wits had been addled by the fall<sup>110</sup>, but before she could continue one of Shambas's Sentinel pilots cut in.

'Movement on the ridge line, looks like warriors. Five confirmed, but there may be more behind them.'

'Jek, Rowen, check it out,' Shambas ordered, before Sulla could get a word in edgeways for once<sup>111</sup>. The designated pilots went trotting off, and, so far as I could tell from the subsequent vox chatter, had a thoroughly enjoyable time using their superiority in both speed and the range of their weapons to carve up the warriors like sides of grox<sup>112</sup>.

Despite the advent of the warriors, the mawloc continued to circle the snowliner instead of making for easier prey<sup>113</sup>, and I began to realise that my perilous refuge was even more precarious than I'd feared. The next time the huge creature surfaced, a mouth wider than I was tall snapped at the tracks, leaving deep, bright scores in the rusted metal; if I stayed where I was, clinging to the huge crawler's undercarriage, sooner or later it would manage to grab me by sheer blind luck. 'Can't someone get this bloody worm off my back?' I asked, hoping I didn't sound too petulant.

'We can't get a clear shot,' Sulla said, a trifle huffily, as though I was deliberately keeping all the fun to myself. 'Every time it surfaces, it's hidden beneath the crawler.'

'Then we'll have to get it out into the open,' I said, before once again

realising that my mouth had betrayed me. There was one very obvious way of doing that, which I'm sure occurred to everyone on the vox-net at pretty much the same instant.

'Are you sure you want to do that?' Sulla asked, in the faintly awestruck tone of someone who not only expects the answer to be yes, but can't conceive of the possibility of a refusal. If I balked now, it would be all round the regiment in a matter of hours that Cain was losing his touch, and the unearned respect I relied on so much to keep my back covered and my hide intact would begin to erode. Before I knew it, people would start to question my motives at every turn, and it wouldn't take long for the whole charade to come crashing down around my ears.

'Not in the least,' I admitted, secure in the knowledge that at least it would be taken as a joke, and tensed; if I didn't move fast, my body would lock up, to prevent me from doing anything so potentially suicidal. 'But if I stay here it'll have me for sure.' Just to emphasise the point, the giant worm chose that moment to surface again, the whole sinuous length of it rearing up against the underside of the snowliner. The huge vehicle shuddered, and I grabbed a convenient stanchion to prevent myself being pitched into the grinding cogwheels mere centimetres from my face. Definitely time to go. 'Just make sure you're on target.'

'We'll be there,' Sulla assured me.

I could see no point in delaying any further, and jumped, landing as lightly as I could on the churned-up ice where the gigantic creature had come and gone. Something as big as that would take a moment or two to turn round and come after me once it had filtered the distinctive vibration of running footsteps from the interference provided by the convoy, and by the time it did, I hoped by all that was holy to have found another refuge. Luckily, I had the perfect one in mind.

No sooner had my boots hit the ground than I started running, angling towards the slowly brightening daylight on the other side of the grinding track assembly. As I rounded the back end of it, and emerged fully into the open air, I breathed a sigh of relief; the ramshackle transport crawler I'd noticed the evening before was still where I remembered, rumbling along close to the snowliner, which loomed over it like a Baneblade surrounded by Salamanders.

'Commissar!' a voice called, and I glanced up to see Jurgen's familiar and grime-encrusted face looking down through the broken window, his melta

still ready for use. 'It's coming round again!' I followed the direction of his grubby finger, seeing a rapidly-approaching bow wave of snow and ice, and my breath seemed to freeze in my chest for a moment; it was bigger, and faster, and a lot nearer, than even my most pessimistic imaginings.

'Grenades!' I voxed, sprinting for the rust-encrusted cargo crawler. 'Do you have any?' Which wasn't such a strange question as you might imagine, given my aide's tendency to prepare for any contingency he could possibly foresee.

'Frag or krak?' he asked, as I leapt for one of the towing chains which had caught my eye before, and which looped low enough to be grabbed with a little effort.

'Krak,' I said, swarming up the rusted metal with some difficulty, despite having returned the useless laspistol to my holster by this point. Though the links were large enough to afford reasonable hand and footholds, the whole thing was swaying in a manner I can only describe as alarming, and I found myself even more grateful than usual for the firm grip afforded by the augmetic fingers on my right hand. 'I need something that'll make a dent in the bloody thing's armour.' A job my laspistol most decidedly wasn't up to.

Then the mawloc burst from the ground again, right where I'd been before my desperate leap for the dangling chain, and Jurgen nailed it with another blast from the melta; a deep score appeared in one of the plates of chitin protecting its back, but failed to penetrate the thick armour. He'd clearly had a little more success the first time, however, as a livid wound had been raked along the edge of its jaw, and it clearly flinched, despite being unharmed by the strike. As it put its head down and began to burrow again, a multi-laser burst caught it in the flank, vaporising more chitin, and biting deep into the flesh beneath before the ghastly creature vanished from view once more.

Gaining the slightly less precarious sanctuary of the cargo crawler's hull, I looked round to see that our Sentinels were beginning to join the convoy at last; the command one was jogging comfortably alongside the snowliner, and eliciting no end of excited gesticulation from the passengers aboard it.

'Nicely done, commissar,' Shambas said, waving cheerfully from the open cockpit of his mechanical steed. 'That flushed it out.'

'For a moment,' I said. 'But it'll be back after the snowliner now.'

'Grenades, sir,' Jurgen voxed, leaning out of the shattered window at what seemed to me a near suicidal angle. He had a webbing pouch in the hand he

wasn't employing to hang on for dear life, and as I glanced up in his direction, he lobbed it at me. The package arced through the air, clanged against the grubby metal hull of the cargo hauler, and began to slide down the sloping metal, before coming to rest wedged against one of the promethium drums lashed to it. There were, at least, plenty of handholds in between, and I began to make my way from one piece of stowage to the next, heedless of the grime transferring itself to my already much-abused uniform, which by now was beginning to take on a distinctly russet hue, thanks to my passage up the oxidising chain. I can't pretend it was an altogether enjoyable experience, my movements slowed by the biting cold, and the metal rendered slippery by the encrustation of ice which had built up in every crevice, but I managed to cling on somehow, my resolve boosted no end by the realisation of what would happen if I fell to the ice below.

'Got them,' I confirmed at last, as my hand closed around the pouch, and cast around for something to lob them at. There was no obvious sign of the subterranean monster, but that didn't mean much in itself; I already knew it was bound to return to the snowliner.

So fixated, in fact, had I become with this idea, that I didn't notice the real danger until it was almost too late.

'Shambas,' I shouted, suddenly noticing the telltale wave in the snow a score or so metres away from where I'd expected to see it, 'look out!' The ice was rising at the Sentinel's mechanical heels, the huge bulk of the great worm bursting out of the ice, its obscenely wide jaws agape.

Shambas reacted instantly, directing power to the walker's legs, and it leapt clear, kicking back at the 'nid's malformed snout as it did so, in a spectacular display of piloting skill, the equal of which I've seldom seen before or since. The Sentinel landed a few metres away, and staggered, gyros whining hysterically as Shambas fought to regain its balance. The mawloc turned to follow, and with a blinding flash of insight, I suddenly realised what was happening: the hideous creature was unable to distinguish the mechanical footfalls of the walker from natural ones, and had mistaken it for prey.

All too aware of the scrutiny of hundreds of snowliner passengers expecting the Hero of the Imperium to save their hides, not to mention that of the beleaguered walker pilot, I cast around desperately for some kind of diversion which would at least give Shambas time to regain control, and

allow the other pilots in the squadron to get a shot off too<sup>114</sup>. Fortunately, inspiration struck: priming one of Jurgen's grenades was the work of a moment, as was wedging the pouch containing them into the strapping round the nearest cluster of fuel drums. A couple of swipes with my chainsword was sufficient to sever the lines securing them to the rattling crawler, and within seconds the whole bundle was bouncing across the ice.

The stratagem succeeded beyond my wildest expectations. At best, I'd hoped merely to confuse the beast, and possibly inflict some minor hurt from the detonation and the subsequent conflagration; but, no doubt confused by the pattern of movement, the creature apparently mistook the collection of objects for prey. Whipping its head around, it lunged for the promethium cannisters, and swallowed them in a single gulp.

A moment later the serpentine form convulsed, as the grenades detonated inside its gullet and the spilled promethium from the ruptured tanks ignited. A billow of fire erupted from its mouth, and it crashed to the ice, where it thrashed for a few moments, wreathed in the spreading flames, before gradually becoming still.

'Nicely done, sir,' Jurgen said, his voice in my comm-bead all but swamped by the hysterical cheering of the civilians around him.

'Thanks,' Shambas said, with another wave.

'You're welcome,' I told him, trying to sound as modest as possible. 'Now can somebody stop this bloody thing, so I can get warm?'



## TWENTY-THREE

Unsurprisingly, I felt I'd had enough of the dubious comforts of the snowliner by now, and elected to continue our journey in the scarcely less cramped, but at least reassuringly familiar, confines of a Chimera. On the downside, protocol, and the fact that there was more room in it due to the smaller size of her command squad<sup>115</sup>, meant travelling in Sulla's; but by now even the prospect of her company for the remainder of the trip seemed an acceptable trade-off for the extra security afforded by the heavy bolters the AFV carried. I wasn't really expecting another attack, after driving off the last one so decisively, but you never could tell with 'nids, and I was in no mood to take on another behemoth single-handed.

Fortunately, Sulla seemed fully occupied with coordinating the escort, especially given the Sentinel pilots' tendency to do whatever they saw fit without bothering to clear it with her first, so I was spared the worst of her excessive enthusiasm. Better still, even though the vox and auspex systems the command Chimera were fitted with gave her a thoroughly comprehensive overview of the tactical situation, she persisted in the habit she'd acquired in her days as a platoon commander of riding in the turret for much of the journey, half out of the hatch, where she could see the lay of the land directly, and act as a visible rallying point for her subordinates. (Though this may have had as much to do with the fact that Jurgen was accompanying me, and his presence in the confined space of the passenger compartment was somewhat hard to ignore.)

'Sounds like you're in for quite a reception when we get to Underice,' she



said, on one of the occasions she favoured us with her presence, possibly attracted back inside by the smell of fresh tanna one of the troopers had just drawn from a samovar in the corner<sup>116</sup> next to the weapon rack.

‘Does it?’ I asked, wondering what in the name of the Throne she was driving at, and warming my hands (apart from the augmetic fingers) gratefully round the mug Jurgen had just handed to me. The jolting personnel carrier was a good deal warmer than the landscape outside, but internal heating was hardly a priority for Valhallans, and I still found it more than a little chilly for my tastes.

‘Of course it does,’ Sulla told me, wedging herself into a narrow gap between the auspex console and the ammunition locker, where she could sip at her own drink without having most of it spilled by the jolting of the tracks. ‘Everyone on the snowliner with a portable vox has been talking non-stop about the way you killed that burrower single-handed.’ She glanced at the vox operator, who nodded confirmation, and I felt a sudden sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. My own comm-bead was only tuned to the command frequencies, of course, so the civilian chatter had passed me by, but it was his job to monitor everything, so he should know. ‘The casters and printscribes will be all over the crawler park when we arrive.’

‘Good,’ I said decisively. ‘Then we’ll disengage from the convoy as soon as we get within the defence perimeter, and make directly for the militia garrison.’ I’ve no objection to being the centre of attention under most circumstances which don’t involve incoming fire, but right now the last thing I felt like was being surrounded by a mob of gawping idiots asking imbecilic questions. A hearty meal and a large goblet of amasec seemed a far more appealing prospect. Sulla looked at me a little oddly, so I added ‘we could all do with a little downtime before we head back.’ No harm in appearing more concerned about the troopers than myself either; it all helped to keep them focused on watching my back when the need arose.

‘We could,’ she agreed, no doubt impatient to start in on the ’nids again at the earliest opportunity.

We reached Underice without further incident, just as dusk was beginning to fall across the endless snowfields<sup>117</sup>; a sight I was able to enjoy (in so far as it was possible to take pleasure in anything while losing all sensation in my extremities) from the command Chimera’s turret hatch, Sulla having relinquished her favourite perch while she dealt with the formal handover to

the local forces. Loath as I was to face the freezing temperatures again, I felt it wouldn't hurt to afford the local media the chance of a pict or two, as a form of consolation prize for the interviews I'd be denying them. (And which they'd probably just make up anyway.)

Musing thus, I was a little startled to see a thin plume of rising snow, which I assumed had been thrown up by the tracks of vehicles like our own, forming a thin streak of white against the bruise-coloured clouds lowering in the distance. This latter sight filled me with foreboding, as I'd spent enough time on iceworlds, including this one, to recognise the harbinger of the kind of ferocious whiteout which would make venturing out into the open almost suicidal; but the oncoming storm seemed reassuringly distant, and we'd certainly be under cover before it hit. More immediately disturbing was the approaching group of vehicles, which must have been quite sizeable judging by the height of the plume.

'It is,' Sulla's auspex op informed me cheerfully. 'I've got around twenty blips so far, and more coming on screen all the time. It looks like half the city's turned out to meet you.'

'Emperor's teeth,' I said, taking Sulla's remarks seriously for the first time, and quietly congratulating myself on having already taken steps to avoid the worst of it.

The vanguard of the oncoming blips was, of course, composed of the local forces coming out to escort our charges to safety, which was just as well, all things considered. They managed to take up their positions just in time to keep the majority of the sightseers off our backs, but even so, we were soon surrounded by uncounted numbers of utility crawlers, light and heavy, along with a goodly proportion of tracked cycles, which reminded me a little too strongly of the peculiar hybrids favoured by orks; although I couldn't deny that these seemed fast and manoeuvrable enough for these icy conditions. Wherever I looked, someone seemed to be pointing an imagifer at me, and I even had to duck on a couple of occasions as lens-toting cyberskulls swooped at my head. Fortunately I managed to overcome the impulse to bring these down with a couple of bursts from the pintle mount, although my tiredness and irritation made it a close run thing.

At last we broke free of the crush, our Chimeras and Sentinels forming up in a protective cordon around the command vehicle, and went barrelling across the relatively open icefield surrounding the south-west quadrant of the city<sup>118</sup>. Like most urban areas on Nusquam Fundamentibus there was

little to show the existence of a thriving subterranean community just beneath the snow, although a few low structures broke the surface from time to time, their purpose for the most part obscure.

Given the regularity of the landscape, it wasn't hard to pick out the occasional exception, and I was particularly intrigued by a line of much larger shapes, partially hidden by drifting snow, which loomed in the middle distance. Impelled by curiosity I raised the amplivisor I'd found in the turret, doubtless so Sulla could keep a more effective eye on her underlings, and brought the enigmatic structures into focus.

'Throne on Earth,' I said in astonishment. 'What are they doing there?'

'Commissar?' Sulla asked, her voice in my earpiece sounding almost as puzzled as I felt. 'Is there a problem?'

'It's the cargo shuttles that were supposed to collect us from the *Fires of Faith*,' I said, as their hull markings gradually became clearer, partially obscured by the crust of snow adhering to their fuselages. 'They look like they've been abandoned here. But why would anyone do that?'

It was Sulla who solved that particular little mystery, of course, her logistical expertise coming to the fore once more. Perhaps her sense of good order was affronted by the cavalier waste of so potentially useful a resource, or perhaps she was simply looking for something to do while we sat idly in the militia garrison at Underice waiting for the storm I'd seen approaching to blow itself out. Throne alone knew, I was chafing at the enforced inactivity more than a little myself, and I was hardly the most eager among us to get back to Primadelving and meet the tyrannid threat head-on again.

'Typical Administratum cock-up,' she assured me cheerfully, dropping uninvited into the chair on the opposite side of my table in the mess hall some three days after our arrival, where I'd been nursing a mug of recaff and a hot grox bun for some time, in the vague hope that something would happen to lift the tedium. The local officers might not have been quite so effusive in their adulation as the civilians, but they were so in awe of my supposed heroism that it was almost impossible to hold a conversation of any kind with them anyway, let alone try to get a card game going. 'As the shuttles had been assigned to meet the *Fires of Faith* before we crashed, they've been written off as destroyed along with it.'

'I see,' I said, my head spinning as it so often did from the sheer idiocy of the bureaucratic mindset. 'So how did they end up here?'

‘The pilots couldn’t get clearance to leave the planet,’ Sulla said, ‘because they officially didn’t exist. But the starport authorities in Primadelving ordered them to clear the pads in any case.’

‘Right,’ I said, trying to grasp it. ‘They sent an official order to shuttles which they refused to acknowledge were there.’

Sulla nodded, her prominent teeth growing more visible than ever as she grinned at the absurdity of it. ‘They did. But not in so many words, of course. Just a general order closing the pads for routine refurbishment, and requiring all traffic currently grounded to withdraw. Which they did.’

‘But why here?’ I persisted.

‘It has relatively few incoming shuttle flights,’ Sulla told me, ‘so they never got round to building permanent landing pads. They just land on the icefield, and their cargoes are brought in by crawler.’

‘So no one in Underice can tell them to frak off,’ I concluded, and Sulla nodded.

‘Which is lucky for us,’ she added, in tones so cheerful I automatically began to fear the worst.

‘How’s that, exactly?’ I asked, already sure I wasn’t going to like the answer.

‘They can take us back to Primadelving,’ Sulla said, as though that should have been obvious. ‘These are heavy duty cargo shuttles, remember, not aircraft. They’ve got enough power to punch through the weather regardless, or even take us out of the atmosphere entirely if that makes the job easier.’

‘They have,’ I agreed, nodding slowly. And drop us right back in the centre of the tightening tyrannid noose, which was not a prospect I relished. On the other hand, try as I might, I couldn’t think of a good reason to oppose the idea; which, given my reputation, would raise too many eyebrows in any case. ‘How do you suggest we get our hands on the shuttles?’ I asked at last, clutching at straws. ‘If the Administratum’s blocking access...’

‘They can’t,’ Sulla told me, clearly carried away with her own cleverness. ‘They’ve already recorded their deployment as part of a Guard operation. So we just tell them they were right all along, and the shuttles are part of our regimental assets.’

‘They’ve also listed them as destroyed in the crash,’ I pointed out, sure she’d have an answer for that one too, and intrigued enough in spite of myself to wonder what it might be. ‘How do you account for them being

back in operation?’

‘Salvage,’ she said, with a perfectly straight face. ‘But we probably won’t have to: military operational requirements automatically overrule Administratum protocols<sup>119</sup>.’

‘They do,’ I agreed. ‘What about the pilots? How do they feel about this?’ Knowing Sulla she’d already tracked them down and twisted their arms, although under the circumstances I doubted that she’d have to apply much pressure. They had literally nowhere else to go.

‘All for it,’ she assured me, confirming my intuition. ‘So long as they can get back on the flight deck, they’re happy.’

‘Well done, captain,’ I said, with all the enthusiasm I could counterfeit. ‘Your initiative does you credit.’

Sulla beamed at me, as though I’d just offered her a sugar lump.

‘I do my best,’ she said smugly.



## TWENTY-FOUR

I was right, the situation hadn't improved at all while I'd been away: quite the reverse, in fact. The hellish weather conditions hadn't bothered the 'nids in the slightest, and the first thing I saw when I arrived back in the command post was a ring of icons poised to choke the life out of Primadelving. The realisation that we had at least acquired the use of some spacegoing shuttles, which could loft me to the safe haven of the orbital docks, well out of reach of the tyrannids if the worst came to the worst, was something of a comfort, of course, but on the whole I'd much rather have been somewhere else entirely.

'Welcome back,' Broklaw greeted me, without a trace of irony. 'I was beginning to think you'd miss all the fun.'

'I'm sure there are enough 'nids to go round,' I replied, reflecting that if this really was his idea of a good time then he desperately needed to get out more. 'What did I miss?' Not that I cared a jot, but it never hurt to look interested, and at least finding something else to concentrate on kept my mind from dwelling too much on all the worst case scenarios.

'The 'nids are still on the move,' Kasteen said, with a wave at the hololith, apparently in case I hadn't realised for myself just how badly we were frakked. 'And the whiteout's put paid to any more refugee convoys.' She shrugged expressively. 'Which were getting more and more chancy anyway, since the 'nids started closing in.'

'At least we've got the shuttles now,' I said. 'We can resume the evacuation at once.' I didn't envy the passengers at all, our relatively brief

journey having been unpleasant in the extreme; for once I'd begun to appreciate how Jurgen usually felt on taking to the air. True to form, though, he'd kept his feelings to himself, enduring the buffeting with his habitual stoicism.

'Good thing too,' Broklaw said. 'We've still got about eighty per cent of the civilians to get out from underfoot.'

'Which means we can clear the lot in about five hundred flights per shuttle,' I said, 'if we modify the cargo holds with temporary flooring to create a couple of extra decks.' Catching his interrogative look, I added, 'Sulla's already dealing with that.'

'Five hundred flights?' Kasteen said, in tones of stark incredulity. 'We'll be overrun long before they've completed that many.'

'I know,' I said. 'But there are shuttles at the orbital docks too, dozens of them. Sulla's requisitioning those as well.'

'Shame nobody thought of that before,' Broklaw said sourly, and I shrugged in agreement.

'You can blame the Administratum for that,' I said, 'taking everything too literally as usual.' To give her her due, once getting her hands on the abandoned shuttles had planted the idea, Sulla had gone after the rest with the single-minded tenacity she usually reserved for tackling enemies of the Imperium; and although I'd been perfectly happy to weigh in with whatever support my position and reputation afforded, I'd ended up more or less spectating as she ploughed through the obstructing bureaucrats like a Baneblade through a rabble of gretchin. 'They were told to give the militia a list of all the assets on Nusquam Fundamentibus capable of assisting in the evacuation effort, and the orbital docks are in space. So it fell outside what they thought was their remit<sup>120</sup>.'

Kasteen made a sound deep in her throat, indicative of infinite disgust at the limitations of the bureaucratic mind, while Broklaw muttered something about 'both hands and a map.'

'So how many of the cattle can we get out from underfoot?' Kasteen asked, returning to the point. 'And how long will it take?'

'Hard to say,' I said, erring as always on the side of caution. 'Once the modifications are complete, on all the shuttles, we can maybe lift around a hundred thousand a day.'

'Four to five days,' Kasteen said, doing the arithmetic. 'Let's hope we've got that long.'

We all glanced at the hololith, thinking the same thing: barring a miracle, we almost certainly hadn't.

'What about the defensive perimeter?' I asked, hoping for better news.

'It's complete,' Broklaw told me, 'and as tight as we can make it. So long as they attack on the surface, we should be able to hold them. Long enough to complete the evacuation, anyway, Emperor willing.'

'Why wouldn't he be?' I asked, raising tight, tension-defusing smiles from both of them. We all knew that throwing back the tyranid tide would be all but impossible, but with the right tactics, and a little luck, we might be able to delay them long enough to rob them of the huge prize of biomass they hoped to seize. Which was all anyone could reasonably hope for, especially as we were part of it. 'Any word on the reinforcements?'

'Still in the warp,' Kasteen said, which meant incommunicado; the first message we'd get would be when they emerged back into the materium, and, given the capricious nature of the warp currents, there was no telling when that was liable to be.

'Then let's try to whittle the 'nids down a bit for them before they get here,' I said, with as much resolution as I could muster.

'Our main problem is going to be securing the city,' Kasteen said, manipulating the controls of the hololith. The image changed, to show the network of trenches and weapon emplacements on the surface, and the vast, tangled skein of caverns and connecting tunnels beneath them. 'We know they've got burrowers, and even before they became active the smaller organisms managed to infiltrate the power station and the agricave through the fissures round the old impact crater.'

'Which we're sitting right in the centre of,' I added, to show I was paying attention.

'Exactly,' the colonel said. 'So we should be prepared for a tunnelling strike.'

I stared at the flickering image in the hololith again, my old tunnel rat's instincts giving me as good a feel for the subterranean space as ever. The knowledge that our enemy could strike anywhere, from three dimensions, made it seem horrifyingly vulnerable, the surface fortifications pitifully inadequate.

'We can never hope to defend all this,' I said, my mouth dry.

'We can't,' Broklaw agreed. 'So we're not going to try. We're evacuating cavern by cavern, back to the surface, and sealing each one as we go. Just



leaving a narrow corridor for the tech-priests ministering to the power plant on the lowest level to get out through.'

'If they can be persuaded to leave,' I said, having had far too much experience of trying to talk sense into acolytes of the Omnissiah in the face of almost certain destruction. (I still suspect Felicia never quite forgave me for blowing up her precious dam in the Valley of Daemons, and as for the Interitus Prime debacle, the only problem with being the sole survivor is having no one around to say 'I told you so,' to.)

'The 'nids'll do that for us when they start coming through the walls,' Broklaw said matter-of-factly, 'and until they do the generators need monitoring. We don't want them going up like the one in the Barrens.'

'Absolutely not,' I agreed fervently, all too aware that the explosion I'd so recently escaped by the skin of my teeth would pale into insignificance compared to the cataclysm waiting to be touched off if the mechanisms and warding charms protecting the far bigger installation which fed the city failed. 'How are you sealing the caverns?'

'Bringing the connecting tunnels down with demo charges,' Broklaw said. 'Federer's sappers are placing them now.'

'I bet the governor loved that,' I said, 'blowing most of her precious capital to rubble.'

'We reached a compromise,' Kasteen said dryly, and I found myself obscurely grateful for having been out of the city for a few days, ravening mawlocs notwithstanding. The negotiations had evidently been fraught; Kasteen, I knew, wouldn't give ground on operational necessity however much political pressure was applied, and though I didn't know Clothilde half as well, I'd seen enough of her to be aware of how firm her resolve could be too. 'The charges are being set, but won't be detonated unless the 'nids make it into the city itself.'

'So the Nusquans won't have to dig the passages out again if the 'nids get bored and go away,' Broklaw added, an edge of sarcasm creeping into his tone.

'The whole point of this operation is to save the city, isn't it?' a new voice asked, and Clothilde strode into the room, her usual rabble of advisors and sycophants yapping at her heels. She looked seriously hacked off about something.

'If at all possible,' I said, cutting in smoothly before Kasteen or Broklaw could say something inadvisable. Diplomacy wasn't exactly my strong suit,

but I was definitely better at it than either of them, and with the 'nids almost certainly about to attack, the more unity I could promote the better. I glanced surreptitiously at my chronograph, finding, to my distinct lack of surprise, that it was nowhere near time for a regular scheduled briefing, and plastered a relaxed, welcoming smile on my face. 'What seems to be the problem, Excellency? Pleased as we always are to see you, I doubt that this is entirely a social visit.'

'You're right, it's not,' Clothilde snapped, turning to Kasteen, with an expression fit to melt ceramite. 'Are you aware that one of your subordinates has taken it upon herself to disrupt commerce across the entire planet?'

'If you're referring to Captain Sulla's requisitioning of every available shuttle, then Commissar Cain was just appraising us of the matter,' Kasteen said frostily. Whatever she may have thought of Sulla on a personal level, she was an officer under her command, and was therefore to be defended from criticism by outsiders whatever their status. 'I haven't had the opportunity of consulting the Captain yet, but I can only commend her initiative.'

'Then I take it you have no intention of rescinding this ridiculous edict?' Clothilde asked, affronted.

Kasteen shook her head. 'I have not,' she confirmed. 'It's the only way to save the lives of the civilians in this city, and it's no thanks to your administration that we stumbled across it. The shuttles remain in military hands until the evacuation's complete. After that, they can go back to making sure you've got enough caba nuts for your next cotillion.'

'Assuming all the debutantes haven't been eaten by then,' Broklaw added, while the governor's face went slowly puce.

'You'll have to forgive the colonel and the major for their lack of verbal finesse,' I cut in hastily, while the sycophants hissed and tutted. 'Soldiers are blunt by nature at the best of times, and this is hardly that.' I gave the two officers a warning glare. 'We're all suffering from lack of sleep.'

'Quite,' Clothilde said, swallowing her anger with manifest difficulty. 'But I'm sure you can keep those loathsome creatures at bay, without it having to affect the entire world. While you're dealing with this little local matter, life goes on perfectly normally in the rest of the provinces.'

'With respect,' I said, 'this is far from a local matter. The entire planet is under threat, and if it falls, worlds right across the sector will be at risk.' I

couldn't believe how blinkered she was; nice enough, so long as she was getting her own way, or could be convinced of another viewpoint, but entirely lacking in the ability to see beyond the end of her nose. Which she wrinkled at me now, in a fashion I was evidently intended to find disarming.

'Surely you exaggerate,' she said.

'The Lord General has dispatched a task force,' I said patiently, 'and an Adeptus Astartes vessel deemed the matter sufficiently serious to divert here to assist as well. I can assure you that Space Marines would have a great many claims on their attention, and wouldn't take a decision like that at all lightly.

'I'm sure that's what they believe,' Clothilde said, 'and I'm sure that you're equally sincere. But these creatures are quite simply too few in number to pose much of a threat. As soon as the Space Marines arrive, they'll mop them up in no time.'

'Let's hope they do,' I said. 'But the tyrannids grow stronger with every kill they make, and if they manage to consume everyone currently in the city they'll become unstoppable.' And, more to the point, I wouldn't be around to see anyone try. Then something else occurred to me, and I changed tack. 'If you really want to preserve Primadelving as a symbol of Imperial rule, supporting the evacuation would be the best way to do that. The tyrannids are besieging us because of the vast reserve of biomass the population represents; on an iceworld they're not going to find a lot else to consume. If the population goes, then so does their reason for being here.' Which wasn't exactly true, of course, but I was pretty sure the governor would buy it; one of the problems with being surrounded by toadies all day is that you get used to only hearing the news you want. If I made it sound as though the 'nids would just give up and go away if we got on with what we were doing, there was an excellent chance that she'd leave us alone to do it.

'Are you sure about that?' She nibbled her lip thoughtfully, while I nodded, with every appearance of sincerity.

'It's got to be worth a try,' I said, perfectly truthfully.

'I suppose so.' She nodded once, decisively. 'But I want those shuttles back on their scheduled cargo runs as soon as the operation is concluded.'

'They will be,' I promised, although so far as I was concerned that would include hanging around to pull out as many troopers as managed to make it to the pad as well, and I firmly intended to be among the foremost.

'Then keep me informed,' she said, and swept out, with a final disdainful

glare at Kasteen and Broklaw.

““Your next cotillion?”” I asked. ‘What were you thinking?’

‘I wasn’t,’ Kasteen admitted, having the grace to look a little embarrassed, then we got back to the urgent business of saving the planet.

Unsurprisingly, the atmosphere at the next formal briefing session was more than a little frosty, Clothilde and her hangers-on sitting ostentatiously as far down the table from the Imperial Guard contingent as they could get. Being able to report that a remarkable number of civilians had been cleared out of the city already, thanks to Sulla’s initiative, only seemed to make their mood worse, and they received the news with carefully moderated enthusiasm; but at least the governor had stopped short of evicting us, no doubt reflecting that protecting her planet was a little more important than exacting petty revenge for a few barbed comments<sup>121</sup>.

‘That’s excellent,’ Forres complimented us, unwittingly rubbing salt in the wound. The Nusquans and the Valhallans were grouped together round the hololith now, I noted, instead of remaining at arm’s length from one another, compelling testament to the growing respect between them; by now the survivors of the Nusquan 1st were battle-hardened veterans, who the Valhallans were more inclined to accept as equals, while the fledgling regiment had learned the hard way that the *Tactica Imperialis* didn’t cover every contingency, and that following the lead of troopers who’d seen off tyrannids before was probably their best chance of coming out of the whole mess alive. In this, I’m bound to say, Forres had played a considerable part, developing a fair degree of common sense, which seemed to have filtered down to Brecca and her command staff<sup>122</sup>. ‘The lower levels are completely clear, apart from the power plant, and we’re stationing units ready to hold back the ’nids if they break through along the fault lines.’ She indicated the hololith, where a rash of unit icons marked the caverns the Nusquans had elected to garrison.

‘Exemplary deployment,’ I said, my affinity for three-dimensional spaces kicking in automatically. They’d put at least a company down there, the Nusquans securing the lower levels, while the Valhallans manned the surface defences (which was fine with me, as we’d be the first to the shuttle pads when it was time to pull out, even though we’d be expected to hold them while the Nusquans caught up), and the militia milled around inbetween, trying not to get in the way too much. ‘You might want to put

another platoon over here, in the stalagmite glade<sup>123</sup>, to bolster your flank.'

'We'll do that,' Colonel Brecca said, considering the display for a moment, and nodding. 'Good idea.' It was only an abstract tactical problem for me, of course, as I certainly had no intention of venturing into the lower levels; but as things were to turn out, I'd be grateful for that glimpse of the layout down there sooner than I thought.

Just as I began to turn away, a red rune suddenly flashed into existence, and my breath stilled. It might be a false alarm, of course, but I knew how unlikely that was; and a glance at Colonel Brecca, who was listening to her comm-bead, her expression grim, was enough to snuff out that last, faint hope.

'They've broken through,' she said. 'Burrowers, large and small, with Throne knows how many 'gaunts following up through the tunnels the big ones have left.' She turned, and beckoned to her aide. 'We're needed back in our ops room.'

'Target the burrowers,' I counselled. 'If they're still active, blocking the routes to the surface won't make any difference.'

Brecca acknowledged the advice with a brief nod, then the Nusquans hurried out, Forres trotting after them, her hands already falling to the weapons at her waist.

The local officers looked nervously at one another. After a moment's debate they left too, to bolster the second defensive line, leaving us alone with the governor.

'It seems you were right,' she said tightly.

'Apparently so,' I conceded, while Kasteen and Broklaw got on with the urgent business of ensuring the shuttle pads were adequately defended. At least the storm had blown itself out by now, so our troopers were able to man the trenches without being frozen to death within moments, and I could breathe a little more easily knowing that a couple of companies stood between me and the overland assault which was certain to accompany the underground one<sup>124</sup>. I coughed delicately. 'Perhaps it might be time to consider withdrawing to another city while you can. Purely in the interest of maintaining continuity of government, of course.'

'Of course.' Clothilde shot me an appraising glance. 'But I've no intention of leaving. My job is to inspire and rally the people, and I'm hardly going to do that if I run away at the first sign of trouble.'

'Then I'll wish you good luck,' I said.

‘Thank you.’ For the first time since we’d met, the governor looked a little unsure of herself. ‘If I’m honest, I’d be on the first shuttle out I could, but my mother and grandmother never shirked their duty, and neither will I.’

I nodded gravely, as if I gave the proverbial flying one. ‘Ten generations of forebears looking over your shoulder must be lot to live up to,’ I said.

Clothilde looked surprised for a moment. ‘No,’ she said, ‘the actual bloodline only goes back two generations. Granny took the throne after poisoning her aunt.’ I must have looked surprised, because she coloured a little. ‘Only because she had to,’ she added hastily, and her entourage nodded vigorously in agreement. ‘The aunt was quite insane. Completely paranoid.’

‘I’ve met a few governors like that,’ I assured her, straight faced, marvelling inwardly yet again at the mentality of the aristocracy, and went to deal with the tyrannid incursion, which at least was relatively easy to understand.



## TWENTY-FIVE

The next few days fell into a predictable pattern of tyranid assaults above and below, which we repeatedly repulsed, although not without grave losses among the defenders. The Nusquans bore the brunt of it, retreating cavern by cavern from the lower levels, and sealing the tunnels behind them wherever they could; but the tyranids were relentless, boring new passageways as soon as the old ones were closed, and altering their tactics with every fresh assault.

We hardly had it easy on the surface, either; although for the most part, at least, the encircling swarm only came at us over the ice, the hive mind evidently having decided to reserve the majority of its burrowers for the assault on the caverns below. The few exceptions it threw at our fortifications in an attempt to outflank them were easy meat for the overlapping fire lanes of our heavy weapon emplacements: mindful of the lessons they'd learned so painfully on Corania, the 597th were well prepared for this particular tactic, and the 'nids soon went back to attempting to swamp us by sheer weight of numbers. We also had air support from the local Valkyries, which did sterling work in breaking up the main formations before they could throw themselves against our trench line, and for which we were truly thankful; but a continuous tide of malevolent chitin continued to batter against the breakwater of our defences with little respite.

'I'm surprised they're not using gargoyles against us,' I said, having seen for myself how effective the airborne horrors could be at circumventing

fixed defences more often than I would have liked, but to my vague surprise this particular swarm seemed to be eschewing the use of winged bioforms.

‘That would be because the crosswinds are too strong and unpredictable,’ Magos Izembard remarked tonelessly, sweeping into our command centre without warning, and making his way over to the hololith through the horde of bustling troopers necessary to coordinate such a huge operation. He seemed unusually agitated, although his familiar monotone did nothing to betray it; his body language was another matter entirely, however, and I must confess I was a little surprised. It’s an article of faith among the Mechanicus that strong emotions are a human weakness, and an unwelcome distraction on the path to understanding the Omnissiah, so whatever had the magos so worked up had to be grave indeed.

‘A pleasant surprise,’ I greeted him, although my suddenly itching palms were strongly intimating that his sudden advent was liable to be anything but good news. ‘What can we do for you?’

‘You can vox the commanders of the Nusquan 1st and the militia,’ Izembard said, ‘and the governor, if you see much point in that. I have attempted to do so repeatedly, along with yourselves, but been unable to get a message through.’

‘All the vox-channels are pretty clogged,’ I said, reflecting that he’d probably taken their overloading as a sign of the Machine-God’s displeasure. ‘And operational messages get the highest priority.’

‘As they should,’ Izembard droned. ‘But I have news of the utmost importance.’

‘The last civilian shuttle’s just cleared the pad,’ Sulla voxed at that moment, from her command Chimera on the fringes of the starport<sup>125</sup>, and a ragged cheer broke out across the operations room. I didn’t suppose for one moment that we’d managed to clear every single civilian from the city; there were bound to be a few who’d stayed hidden with the idea of looting the deserted metropolis, or because they were just too stubborn or eccentric to leave, but, quite frankly, I felt that they deserved all they were going to get.

‘Pass the word to the Nusquans,’ Kasteen ordered, with some relief. ‘Abandon the lower levels and pull back.’ She glanced at the hovering tech-priest. ‘And you’d better get your cogboys out of the power plant too. When the troops leave, their lifeline’s going to be severed.’

‘Begin withdrawal,’ Broklaw transmitted to our people, almost



simultaneously. 'Fall back to the pads, and keep them clear.'

'Commissar,' Izembard said, ignoring the frantic activity around us. 'You have to listen. We have a definite time at which the bioforms you found were frozen.'

'Good for you,' I said, adopting an expression of polite interest, and waiting for him to come to the point, which even a tech-priest was bound to do eventually. 'You must be delighted to have finally worked it out.'

'It's not just a question of intellectual curiosity,' Izembard grated, 'it's a matter of life and death. For this entire world.'

To say I was surprised would be understating the matter considerably. In my experience, tech-priests were hardly given to exaggeration, and I looked at him again, more seriously, noting once more the signs of agitation he was obviously taking considerable pains to suppress. I furrowed my brow. 'I'm afraid I don't follow,' I said. 'Why should it matter so much when the 'nids arrived?'

'Because of the impact which formed the geology of this region,' Izembard said, striding to the hololith, and erasing the current tactical display with a flick of his mechadendrites. Broklaw took a step forward, a trenchant protest about this cavalier behaviour forming on his lips, which I forestalled with a gesture. Whatever this was about, I wanted to see it.

A stylised cometary fragment appeared in the display, on an intersecting orbit with the looming bulk of Nusquam Fundamentibus, and duly collided with it. A few mountain ranges fell over, an impact crater appeared, and gigatonnes of vaporised slush rose up to enshroud the whole globe. When it cleared, the geography was more or less as I remembered it from the pics in the briefing slate.

'The asteroid,' I said. 'You were trying to work out whether the 'nids got here before or after it hit.'

'That's the whole point,' Izembard said. 'So far as we can tell, they arrived at exactly the same time as the impact event.'

'They hitched a lift on a comet?' Broklaw asked, not bothering to hide his incredulity.

'There was no comet,' I said, the whole thing suddenly making sense to me. 'It was a bioship, which crashed here, just like we did. Only at a much steeper angle.'

'Exactly,' Izembard said, and a cold chill rippled down my spine.

'Which means we're sitting right on top of it,' I said.

‘A fragment, at least,’ Izembard said. ‘And from the increasing cohesion of the swarm we’ve observed recently, it’s safe to assume that it’s regenerating.’

‘The missing orks,’ I said, with horrified understanding. ‘The swarm’s been feeding it all this time.’ Which must mean that the whole of the Leeward Barrens was riddled with burrower tunnels, all the way out to the Spinal Range, and that for every ’nid we’d observed on the surface, untold numbers had been scuttling around undetected beneath our feet.

‘My thoughts exactly,’ Izembard said. ‘Fortunately the city was too well defended for it to risk a direct assault before now, or it would have been fully reactivated by this point.’

‘When it does, it’ll re-establish a connection with the hive fleet that sent it,’ Kasteen said, her expression of stark realisation no doubt mirroring my own. ‘And there are over a dozen worlds in this sector which have been settled in the last few thousand years.’

‘It’ll be banging the dinner gong,’ I said, ‘with the entire sector on the menu.’

‘Then we need to destroy it,’ Kasteen said. ‘I’ll pass the word to the Nusquans to counter-attack, and we’ll reinforce with as many units as we can.’

‘That would be extremely inadvisable,’ Izembard said, to my immense and well-concealed relief. ‘The bioship fragment must be at least a kilometre beneath the lowest level of the city, and the only access to it would be along the tunnels bored by the tyrannids themselves. We can infer that the system is extensive, but beyond that we have no way of telling which connect to the hive node, which to other destinations, and which have simply been left by a burrower moving from one place to another.’

‘And the tunnels aren’t going to be all that wide,’ I added. We’d all seen termagants swarming out of them, in the wake of the huge serpentine burrowers, so we could picture the number of troopers they’d hold easily enough. ‘We’d have to go in on foot.’ Which would make any large body of troops terrifyingly vulnerable, clustered together in the dark, the majority unable to turn around or use their weapons; and there was no doubt about it, we’d need huge numbers on our side to have any chance at all of getting through to our objective, even if we had a clue where it was.

‘Suicide to try,’ Broklaw agreed, which at least saved me the bother of trying to weasel my way out of leading this ridiculous expedition, as

everyone would undoubtedly expect a Hero of the Imperium to do.

I nodded, as though I'd been considering the matter carefully. 'Not much chance of a kill team getting through either,' I added, contriving to give the impression that I was reluctantly ruling that out as well; if the thought occurred to anyone else, it was carrots to credits who'd get stuck with the job of leading them in, so I'd better shoot it down now before someone started getting ideas. 'There must be thousands of 'nids down there.'

'Clearing the tunnels is a job for the Space Marines,' Kasteen agreed. 'We'll brief them as soon as they arrive.'

'Regrettably,' Izembard said, 'unless they do so within the next six to eight hours, it will be too late.'

'Too late why?' I asked, already dreading the answer.

'Because our analysis of the response time of the outlying elements of the swarm to changes in circumstance elsewhere is tending towards zero,' Izembard proclaimed dramatically. He glanced from one of us to another, seeing nothing but blank incomprehension on every face. 'It's woken up,' he explained, in plainer Gothic, 'and it's coordinating the swarm with almost complete efficiency. We calculate that it will be strong enough to begin reaching out to the fleet which spawned it before the end of the day.'

Kasteen, Broklaw and I looked at one another, shocked speechless. After a moment, I found my voice.

'That doesn't mean there are other bioships close enough to respond straight away,' I said, aware even as I spoke that I was clutching at straws. Even if that were true, it would just be a matter of time before an armada of the hideous creatures descended on the sector, dooming not just Nusquam Fundumentibus, but untold numbers of other worlds; which would leave me uncomfortably short of boltholes to run for.

'It doesn't mean there aren't, either,' Broklaw said.

'If we can't get to it, there's no point debating the matter,' Kasteen said decisively. 'We'll just have to pray that the task force or the Space Marines arrive before it can call in any reinforcements, and bombard the site from orbit.'

'That may not be enough,' Izembard said. 'Even a concentrated lance barrage would be unlikely to damage a target buried so deeply.'

'Then we're frakked,' I said, reflecting that at least we'd be spared having to break it to Clothilde that the Navy were about to start using her precious capital for a spot of target practice; news I felt sure she was unlikely to take

well. 'All we can do now is pull out, before the 'nids overrun the place, or the power plant blows up.' My voice trailed away, as my brain finally caught up with my mouth. I turned to Izembard. 'How long is it likely to be before the power station goes critical once your people abandon it?'

'It shouldn't go critical at all,' Izembard said, looking as affronted as it was possible to with a face composed mainly of metal. 'We have protocols in place for an ordered shutdown before those ministering to the system pull out. The plant in the Leeward Barrens had been left unstaffed by the actions of the tyranids, preventing the safety precautions from taking effect.'

'How long would it take to go bang if they just ran for it, then?' I persisted. 'Without hanging around to shut things down properly and light the incense?'

Kasteen and Broklaw were nodding thoughtfully, seeing where I was going with this, but Izembard still seemed to be struggling with the idea. 'Pressure levels would begin to rise towards critical in about twelve hours,' he said. 'But an actual detonation would take considerably longer, depending on the strength of the welds, and how recently the prayer slips had been renewed.'

'We don't have twelve hours,' Broklaw said. 'Can your cogboys do anything to speed it up a bit?'

The few remaining areas of flesh on Izembard's face paled, then went a strange mottled purple, and when he spoke again his vox-coder seemed to buzz a little more than usual. 'That would be complete anathema to a faithful servant of the Omnissiah,' he said flatly.

'So would leaving an entire planet to be eaten by 'nids, I would imagine,' I replied.

Izembard's shoulders slumped, as much as was possible given their inhuman rigidity, and the heightened colour slowly drained from his face, returning the skin to the unwholesome pallor it normally displayed. He nodded slowly. 'Certain safety protocols could be circumvented,' he conceded. 'But that wouldn't accelerate the process enough to culminate before the hive node recovers fully.'

'Then we're still frakked,' Broklaw said.

'Not necessarily,' the magos said, startling us all; not least himself, I suspected. 'I strongly disapprove of the wanton destruction of any mechanism, but the Omnissiah teaches us that dispassionate analysis is the surest way to the correct solution, and in this instance the dictates of pure

reason would seem to admit of no other choice. A sufficient quantity of explosives, placed near the inlet filters, would release the pressure from the magma pocket beneath the power plant.'

'Causing a volcanic eruption,' I said, to show I'd caught on, although the object lesson I'd received in the Leeward Barrens was hard to forget.

'Precisely,' Izembard said. 'Although may the Omnissiah forgive me for suggesting it.'

'Under the circumstances, I'm sure He'll be prepared to stretch a point,' I said. 'Better to lose one power plant than have every machine on the planet shut down, surely?'

Izembard nodded slowly, looking somewhat reassured, and I turned to Kasteen again. 'We need Federer,' I said. 'The Nusquans don't have any sappers of their own.'

'He's too busy shoring up our defences on the surface,' Broklaw said, 'and he'll be busier than ever now we're pulling back. Slapping a couple of demo charges on a pipe and setting a timer isn't exactly advanced theology.'

I couldn't be entirely sure, but I thought I saw Izembard wince as he spoke.

'I'll vox the Nusquans and advise,' I said. 'They should still be holding the plant if the tech-priests haven't pulled out yet.'

'Thanks.' Kasteen was already turning away, to where a small group of aides were hovering anxiously, all carrying data-slates. 'That would help.'

My comm-bead was tuned to the 597th's operational frequencies, of course, but it wouldn't take much to find out which ones the Nusquans were using; but all our vox ops were busy, and, knowing that lives probably depended on leaving them to get on with their jobs, I was understandably reluctant to interrupt them. Then an alternative occurred to me, and I switched to the band reserved for the Commissariat.

'Forres, this is Cain,' I began, launching into the most condensed version of the crisis facing us that I could manage, without bothering to waste any time on the preliminary pleasantries. She listened carefully, asking a few questions when my desire for brevity overwhelmed the need for clarity, and waited for me to finish.

'Sounds like we're frakked,' she said. 'We're still hanging on at the objective, but we used the last of our demo charges to bring down a trygon tunnel the 'nids were using to try and cut us off from the Spiral<sup>126</sup>. You'll have to bring some more with you.'

‘We’ll get right on it,’ I said, cursing under my breath. As you’ll appreciate, I had no intention at all of putting myself in the firing line, being rather more concerned with how quickly I could bag a seat on one of the shuttles which were, even now, on their way to pluck us to safety. But Forres clearly expected me to undertake this fool’s errand myself.

I glanced at the hololith, which by now had been restored to the tactical display Izembard had so cavalierly overridden, looking for a unit I could palm the job off on, but, try as I could, none of them seemed able to assist. The tyranids had redoubled their efforts in the face of our withdrawal, and every unit out on the ice was being hard pressed.

With a faint sigh, I bowed to the inevitable, knowing that if I didn’t, the planet, the sector, and, most importantly, the undeserved reputation I relied on to make my life as trouble-free as possible, given the trouble-magnet nature of my job, would all vanish down the maw of the hive fleets.

‘I’ll be there ASAP<sup>127</sup>,’ I assured her. After all, the Nusqans still seemed in control of the power station and its immediate surroundings, so I’d have plenty of troopers to hide behind: and with the scout Salamander I generally favoured as a personal conveyance, I should be able to outrun most of the trouble we were liable to encounter, especially with Jurgen in the driving seat. Which ought to leave me arriving back just in time to board a shuttle, with another piece of relatively risk-free conspicuous gallantry to affect modesty about under my belt. Not to mention that, while I was running around the city like a glorified delivery boy, there was no chance of being dragged out onto the surface to freeze my nads off encouraging the troops.

All in all, I began to convince myself, things could be a good deal worse; little realising just how much so they were about to become.



## TWENTY-SIX

Jurgen was waiting for me as I left the governor's palace, by the side door next to the kitchens, the engine of the scout pattern Salamander he'd requisitioned from the vehicle pool growling quietly. Though I generally favoured the rugged little vehicles for personal transport, I'd been understandably reluctant to use one on Nusquam Fundamentibus; the sub-zero temperatures made the open passenger compartment far too uncomfortable to endure for long, so on the occasions when I really couldn't avoid venturing out onto the surface I'd made do with the relative warmth and comfort of a Chimera. The wide open spaces of the cavern city were all climate controlled, of course, feeling to me no cooler than a brisk spring morning on a temperate world, so I clambered up to my habitual perch next to the pintle mount without so much as a shiver, and a reassuring sense of familiarity. Not even grazing my shin on the crate of explosives I found waiting there was enough to distract me from a growing sense of optimism about the success of our mission.

'Sure you've brought enough demo charges?' I asked Jurgen lightly, and he hitched himself up in the driver's seat to peer at me over the armour plate separating us with a frown of consternation.

'We can get some more if it's not enough,' he said, taking the pleasantries as literally as he took most other remarks.

'I'm sure it'll be fine,' I assured him. 'You've got enough here to bring down a gargant.'

'If the orks had one, and the 'nids hadn't eaten 'em all,' he agreed,

nodding sagely, then resumed his seat and gunned the engine. Years of familiarity with his robust approach to driving had prepared me for what followed, and I grabbed the pintle mount reflexively as we jerked into rapid motion, keeping my feet with relative ease.

The governor's palace was halfway up the wall of the largest of the upper caverns, where the good citizens who lived in the streets below could get a good look at it towering over their heads<sup>128</sup>, and as we passed the wrought iron gates enclosing the formal gardens which fronted it, I was able to appreciate the full scale of Primadelving for the first and last time; rattling about in a Chimera was hardly the best way to sightsee. Tiers of streets, houses and emporia fell away before us, in a vista as spacious as any fair sized town on the surface of more Emperor-favoured worlds, and it was an effort to remind myself that there were more than a score of similar bubbles in the rock, all painstakingly excavated over countless generations, of a similar size to this one. The thought was sobering, to say the least; if everything went well with my errand, all that hope and effort would come to naught, obliterated in an instant by a cataclysm so vast it was all but impossible to imagine.

As we descended towards the cavern floor at Jurgen's usual breakneck pace, I found the quiet, deserted streets uncomfortably eerie, imagining movement in every alley mouth and behind every shuttered window. All nonsense, of course, although that didn't stop me from checking that the heavy bolter on the pintle mount was loaded and ready to fire at a moment's notice; if the tyranids had sent a lictor or two to scout out the terrain ahead of their advance, I'd have no warning of an attack other than a flicker of movement in the corner of my eye.

Jurgen, of course, positively relished the emptiness of the streets, and opened the throttle to its fullest extent, sending the little vehicle howling down the boulevards as though all the daemons of Chaos were after us, which was fine by me; if anything was going to come bounding out of the shadows waving its scything claws it would have to be moving even faster than we were to have a hope of making an effective strike.

Now and again we caught sight of a Nusquan unit, or a militia squad or two, pulling back from the lower levels on their way to the shuttle pads, although, disinclined as always to share the road with anything which might slow him down, Jurgen generally directed us along parallel carriageways to the retreating troopers. They were pulling back in good order, so far as I



could see, although they'd clearly been in a hard fight, the weary trudge of those on foot, and the horizon-piercing stares of all, proclaiming their psychological as well as physical exhaustion.

'We're just leaving the palace district,' I voxed Forres, as we bulleted into one of the tunnels connecting it to the next cavern in the downward chain; although it was so wide and high that it hardly felt like a tunnel at all, with side roads and hab blocks surrounding the main highway on all sides (including the roof).

'Don't take too long,' she replied, the sound of gunfire audible over the vox-link. 'We're being pressed hard down here.'

'Hold as long as you can,' I said, trying to sound calm. With the bulk of the Nusquan forces withdrawing, the 'nids were advancing on all sides, and the geothermal power plant had become the tip of an increasingly precarious salient; into which I was now heading as fast as Jurgen could take me, which was very fast indeed. Positively the last place anyone with the remotest vestige of common sense would want to be, under the circumstances.

But there was no turning back now; practically every trooper on Nusquam Fundumentibus would know I was on my way, and believe me eager to enter the fray on their behalf. For many, the prospect of fighting alongside the hero I was popularly supposed to be, in the confident expectation that I would somehow be able to turn the tide, was undoubtedly the only thing keeping them in the fight, beset as they were on all sides by bloodcurdling horrors. If I let them down, morale would collapse, our orderly withdrawal would become a bloody rout, and the 'nids would be all over us like Jurgen's psoriasis. My chances of making it to a shuttle in one piece would be slender at best, and as soon as it started to get round that the celebrated Hero of the Imperium had cut and run like a panicked gretchin, I wouldn't be able to count on anyone to watch my back from now on.

'We're coming up on the Spiral,' my aide informed me a moment later, as we flashed through an intersection, and began descending fast enough to pop my ears. I swallowed, gaining some relief, and glanced around at the caverns we passed through<sup>129</sup>. The deeper we went the more the vista changed, from affluent residential areas to poorer ones; then the manufactoria took over, huddled in the lowest levels, where the inexhaustible supply of geothermal power could keep them running indefinitely. On the opposite carriageway the Nusquans were retreating in a

steady stream, many of the Chimeras carrying additional troopers clinging to their upper surfaces, unable to hitch a ride inside; seeing us, they waved and cheered, each ‘*Huzzah!*’ another coffin nail in my steadily dwindling hopes of just being able to offload the demo charges we were carrying and make a run for the surface ourselves, while Forres and her troopers got on with the job of planting them. By now everyone was probably expecting me to lead a charge down the burrower tunnels to butcher the bioship with my chainsword.

So musing, I gradually became aware of the sounds of combat: the rattling of lasguns, the harsher bark of autocannon, and the occasional dull thud of explosive detonation making themselves heard above the roar of the Salamander’s engine. ‘Looks like trouble ahead,’ Jurgen remarked laconically, and with his habitual understatement.

Trouble just barely began to cover it, I thought, as we roared into a wide plaza, surrounded on all sides by the towering walls of fabrication mills and the loading bays from which whatever was produced here would be dispatched by lorry to the far corners of the city<sup>130</sup>. Guard troopers in Nusquan uniforms were taking what cover they could, while firing grimly at a solid wall of tyranids, advancing inexorably on their positions. Wave after wave of the ghastly creatures fell to the withering fire, but still they advanced undaunted, as indifferent to the deaths of hundreds of their kind as we would be to the expenditure of an equal number of las-bolts. Among them larger forms loomed, lumbering pyrovores gorging on the fallen, tyranid and human alike, while the weapon symbiotes embedded in their backs vomited plumes of fire at the beleaguered defenders. A couple of the Chimeras were replying in kind, their forward-mounted flamers incinerating the scuttling mass of smaller creatures in front of them, while the multi-lasers in their turrets swept the ranks behind.

‘Can you get us through?’ I asked, ducking below the armour plate protecting the passenger compartment while fleshborer and devourer rounds rattled and splattered against it. The barrage abruptly ceased as Jurgen triggered our own flamers, and I popped back up again, grabbing the pintle-mounted heavy bolter and cracking off a few rounds myself just to show willing. I might just as well have been lobbing pebbles for all the difference it made to the horde charging down on us, but it looked suitably heroic, and it wouldn’t hurt to boost the troopers’ morale a bit. So far as I could see, the route deeper into the cavern city was about as comprehensively blocked as

it was possible to be, but it never hurt to sound fully committed to the mission; you never knew who might be listening on the vox-net.

‘Not till we get the road clear,’ Jurgen told me, as though that was simply a matter of time, although looking at the wave of chitin flowing into the square, I must confess to feeling considerably less optimistic than he evidently did.

As I scythed down a brood of ‘gaunts which were balancing on a nearby rooftop, poised to pounce on an oblivious heavy weapon squad, one of the tracked cycles I’d noticed up on the surface came roaring towards us, apparently just as much at home on the paved surfaces of the city as among the snowfields above. Instead of the garish colours of the civilian machines I’d seen before, it had been painted in the arctic camo scheme the Chimeras were sporting, and a pennant waving from the vox antenna behind the driver carried a Nusquan unit patch. Evidently they had rough riders<sup>131</sup> somewhere in their SO&E<sup>132</sup>, although no one had thought to mention the fact to me.

The cycle pulled alongside us, its rider tapping his comm-bead as he scanned the frequencies to synchronise with mine; before he could manage it, one of the smaller serpentine forms burst from the ground almost in front of him, slashing the air with its scything claws, which no doubt proved something of a distraction. He responded instantly, however, rearing the bike up on its tracks to put the bulk of the machine between himself and the barrage of spinefist needles spitting from the creature’s thorax; the deadly slivers struck the roaring engine and the spinning treads, before the rapidly-moving vehicle collided heavily with the startled ravener, moving in swiftly beneath the reach of its flailing claws. The rider hit the carriageway hard, and rolled, unslinging his lasgun as he rose: but before he could fire I squeezed the trigger of the bolter, and reduced the slithering nightmare to a pile of shredded offal.

‘Thanks,’ the man said, jogging towards us as Jurgen coasted to a halt, and to my surprise I recognised the sargeant who’d accompanied Forres into the agricave complex.

‘Sergeant Lanks,’ I said, returning his salute. ‘An unexpected pleasure.’

‘It’s lieutenant, now,’ he replied, looking faintly embarrassed. ‘First man in the regiment to get a commission. Good to see you again too, sir.’

‘Shame it wasn’t under quieter conditions,’ I said, ducking as one of the lumbering pyrovores belched flame in our direction and set fire to a

warehouse a score or so metres away. The mass of the tyranid swarm was closing in around us, and the Nusquans were losing ground, despite their best efforts. 'What's going on?'

'They've cut off the commissar,' he said, baffling me for a moment, until I realised he meant Forres. 'Her group's still holding out at the power station, but we can't get through to reinforce or extract them.'

'We'll get through,' Jurgen said, with rather more determination than practicality, revving the engine as if eager to start. Forewarned, I grabbed the pintle mount for support as he spun us in place, triggered the flamer again, and barbecued another brood of hormagaunts.

'If there was a way, we'd have found it,' Lanks said, with vehemence, as though my aide's words implied criticism of the resolve of the troopers fighting and dying all around us.

'I don't doubt that for a second,' I said, with a surge of relief. If we couldn't get through an entire army of tyranids it was hardly our fault; we'd done our best, but we'd been beaten back by the sheer mass of the swarm facing us. Now I could withdraw with the Nusquans, get aboard the next available shuttle, and wait for the task force and the Space Marines to arrive, bemoaning our bad luck the whole way. A few appropriately sober words about Forres's noble sacrifice, and I'd be in the clear.

'We were keeping them back well enough until about twenty minutes ago,' Lanks told us. 'Then suddenly the whole swarm went on the attack, perfectly coordinated, right along our defensive line.'

'That's why,' I said, seeing movement through the smoke still wreathing the blazing warehouse. Another monstrous form was coming into view, towering over the smaller creatures around it, brandishing boneswords and a venom cannon, and at the sight of it, I don't mind admitting my mouth went dry. 'The hive tyrant took control. If you take it down, the whole swarm will be thrown into confusion.' Although why I should offer any advice liable to put me back in the firing line, I have no idea.

'We're targeting it, of course,' Lanks said, 'every chance we get. But the ones around it are just soaking up the incoming fire.' As if to confirm his words, a salvo of las and autocannon rounds ripped into the towering monstrosity; but before the majority of them could strike, the squat bulk of the creatures immediately surrounding it moved to put themselves between the incoming fire and the tyrant it had been aimed at. Barrages which would have obliterated a lesser creature rebounded harmlessly from these living

shields, and a couple of nearby scavengers lumbered closer, gobbling up the 'gaunts felled by the ricochets.

'This is Commissar Cain,' I voxed on an open channel, as inspiration suddenly struck. 'Disregard the tyrant, and target the pyrovores.'

'Are you sure, sir?' Jurgen asked, as I grabbed the heavy bolter again, and began adding what little I could to the blizzard of incoming fire which suddenly began sleeting around the lumbering scavengers. Both staggered, the leading one dropping heavily to its knees, where it continued single-mindedly to search for fresh carrion, the slow oscillation of its head looking for all the world like dazed incomprehension. 'You know what happens if the guts get ruptured.'

'Exactly,' I said, peering hopefully through the sights of the bolter. 'The flammable gas it spits out meets the air, and...' I couldn't be sure if I felt the shock of detonation, the suspension of the Salamander being somewhat basic, and transmitting an inordinate number of jolts to my long-suffering sacrum at the best of times, but there was no denying the evidence of my eyes. 'That happens,' I concluded, a trifle smugly if I'm honest. Bits of charred viscera pattered around me, then the carrion storm redoubled as the second wounded fire-beast went up like its fellow, their thick chitinous carapaces converted in an instant to withering shrapnel which tore through the 'nids surrounding them.

The tyrant bellowed, staggering, wreathed in flames from the thick, combustible gel which had splattered it from the exploding incendiary beasts. Flailing blindly with its boneswords, it ripped the guts from another of the flame-spitting scavengers, which promptly went up in turn, the wounded giant at the very centre of the firestorm this time. All around us the tyranids began milling uncertainly, scuttling for shadows or charging blindly down the guns of the nearest units, according to whatever instincts ruled them in the absence of direction from the hive mind.

'Bring it down!' Lanks commanded, in awestruck tones, which I could hardly blame him for; the strategem I'd come up with more or less on the fly had succeeded beyond my wildest hopes, which had, if I'm honest, extended no further than confusing the tyrant a bit and loosening its hold on the swarm enough to aid a fighting retreat. But now it looked as if we were in with a chance of taking it down entirely.

Another hailstorm of heavy weapons fire, supplemented by a generous helping of lasgun rounds, tore into the towering creature, which by now

seemed to be baking in its shell, like a crustacean in an expensive restaurant. Its formidable armour had been fatally weakened by the inferno, and even its kamikaze guardians were unable to save it this time; too busy with being broiled alive themselves to absorb much of the incoming fire, they were smashed aside like an ineffectual tackle on the scrumball pitch. As round after round of heavy ordnance tore the guts out of it, pulverising armour made brittle by the heat, the tyrant staggered, went down, and ultimately expired, with one last reflexive kick which brought the facade of an anonymous fabrication block crashing down on its scorched and battered entourage.

A cheer went up from the Nusquans, and, I must admit, I felt like giving voice myself; with the tyrant out of the way, and its control over the swarm shattered, it looked as though we'd be able to seize the initiative again. A mood of euphoria which lasted mere seconds, I may add, before Forres's voice in my comm-bead brought me back to the reality of my situation with a thud.

'What's keeping you?' she asked, and I suddenly realised that pulling back to the surface with the Nusquans wasn't going to be an option any more. The unexpected success of my gamble had given us the chance to punch through the suddenly directionless swarm, before the buried hive node could dispatch another tyrant to retake control.

'Tyranid rush hour,' I said, as Jurgen gunned the engine, and began accelerating towards the tunnel mouth he'd indicated before. 'Just asking them nicely to move over.'

'Don't take too long,' Forres cautioned, 'or we won't be here to meet you.'

'On our way,' I said. As I spoke, a demi-score of cyclists formed up around us, Nusquan pennants fluttering in the breeze of their passage, Lanks waving them on from the head of the troop. 'With an escort,' I added, agreeably surprised.

'We'll be waiting,' Forres said.



## TWENTY-SEVEN

I have to admit that these unexpected reinforcements raised my spirits considerably, as I've never been averse to a few extra bodies to hide behind, and although we'd left the main battle behind us, there were still plenty of tyrannid organisms standing between us and our objective. The cycles surrounding us had forward-facing lasguns built into the front fairings, which soon proved their worth, allowing us to punch through the bioforms which tried to impede our progress with surprisingly little difficulty. The vast majority of these were termagants or the larger warrior forms, which were hopelessly outmatched by our speed and the superior range of our weaponry; by the time the survivors had recovered from us getting the first shot off, we were past and away, beyond the effective reach of their fleshborers and devourers, with little in the way of retaliatory fire to worry about. Since the pintle-mounted bolter was higher than the cycles, and able to swivel in any direction, I could swing it round to pick off anything left kicking in our wake after adding its firepower to the initial punch of our charge, which further protected us against any belated return fire.

Jurgen had less opportunity to use the forward-mounted flamer, as the barrier of blazing promethium it would have laid in front of us would certainly have stopped the rough riders, even if the Salamander had been able to carry on through it without suffering too much harm. He did manage to get off a few shots from his beloved melta, however, bracing it against the rim of the driver's compartment and raising himself somewhat precariously to peer over the armour plate as he fired. Since this involved

him taking his hand off the throttle I might have found the whole business somewhat alarming, had I not known that the accelerator would have been jammed fully open from the moment he fired up the engine in any case.

‘Look out,’ I admonished him at one point, and we swerved alarmingly, a warrior form disappearing under our tracks with a faint *crunch*, audible even over the roaring of our engines.

‘Sorry sir, nearly missed the frakker,’ Jurgen said cheerfully, and, to my unspoken relief, returned his attention to the controls, his desire to emulate the rough riders, all of whom were supplementing the built-in firepower of their bikes with laspistols, apparently quenched for now. Nothing else could have kept up with us, my aide cheerfully pushing the highly-tuned engine to its limits as he always did, but the cycles remained locked in formation, the riders grinning like orks, apparently relishing the sensation of breakneck speed just as much as he did.

‘Good of you to tag along,’ I voxed to Lanks, having matched frequencies at last, and the lieutenant waved in response, before picking off a lurking genestealer crouched on a balcony ahead of us with a shot from his laspistol.

‘Least I could do after you saved our necks in the agricave,’ he told me. ‘Besides, I promised the commissar we’d keep the road open for her.’

‘I’m sure she appreciates the sentiment,’ I told him.

‘She does,’ Forres cut in. ‘Where are you?’

‘Close enough to hear gunfire,’ I told her. ‘I take it that’s you?’

‘You take it correctly,’ she said grimly.

The power plant was under siege when we reached it, a mass of chitin lapping against the great bronze doors emblazoned with the cogwheel sigil of the Adeptus Mechanicus, which had been torn from their hinges and lay at a drunken angle against the supporting buttresses. Forres and a handful of troopers were defending the breach gallantly, crouched for cover in the lee of a battered-looking Chimera, which had been parked at an angle in the archway to form a crude but effective barricade. Its power plant seemed still to be working, as the multi-laser in its turret continued to reap a rich harvest from among the scuttling abominations which threw themselves forward with the relentless determination of their kind, although the promethium tank which fed the flamer had apparently long been exhausted.

‘About time you got here,’ the young commissar voxed, and I bristled



involuntarily for a moment before I realised she was joking. 'We've almost run out of 'nids.'

'Don't worry,' I assured her, as we opened fire in unison, tearing a huge hole in the rear of the siege lines. 'There'll always be more along in a minute.' This was undoubtedly true; faced with a fresh target, many of the foul creatures turned, unleashing a barrage of fleshborer and devourer fire against us. I ducked behind the armour plate, but a couple of the riders with us weren't so lucky, and went down hard, falling from their machines as the deadly parasite ammunition began eating them alive from the inside out; the only mercy seemed to be that the high speed impact with the floor of the cavern had left them in no condition to notice.

Able to use the flamer at last, as our escort fanned out, Jurgen triggered it with gusto, incinerating the bulk of the brood facing us, slewing the Salamander from left to right as we slowed, in order to spread the gout of burning promethium as widely as possible.

'Get inside,' Lanks urged, as the riders wheeled and turned, crisscrossing the plaza fronting the Mechanicus shrine. It was hard to be sure, but some kind of devotional mosaic appeared to have been laid there, its design obscured by scorch marks, lasgun pocks, and an inordinate quantity of dead and dying 'nids, most of which were leaking foul-smelling ichor in great profusion. 'We'll hold the tunnel mouth.'

'Sounds good to me,' I agreed, as Jurgen slewed us to a halt next to the parked Chimera. I broke open the crate, and extricated a couple of the demo charges. 'This ought to do it.' I shrugged one of the bulky satchels into place across my shoulder, and handed the other to Jurgen.

'We'll continue to hold here,' Forres said. 'With the riders securing the tunnel mouth, we'll have a clear field of fire across the whole cavern.'

'Sounds good,' I agreed, with a quick glance at the layout. The tunnel mouth was almost directly opposite the entrance to the shrine, and looked worryingly short of cover. 'Take the Salamander over there too: you can set up a crossfire with the bolter, and it'll be something solid to stand behind if the 'nids pull back any of their forces from the main cavern.' Which they probably would, once the hive mind registered that most of the creatures down here had been killed.

Forres nodded. 'Good idea,' she said, and detailed a couple of nearby troopers to move the sturdy little vehicle.

Jurgen glowered, as one of them lowered herself into the driving seat.

‘Take care of it,’ he instructed brusquely, as though he’d ever shown a moment’s consideration for the machine-spirits of anything he’d driven.

I nodded. ‘We’ll be needing it later,’ I said, hoping I was right.

When Izembard had briefed us, I’d formed a mental picture of something similar to the power station we’d investigated so memorably in the Leeward Barrens, albeit on a slightly larger scale; but the reality of the shrine now we’d got to it was almost overwhelming. Huge galleries had been excavated into the rock below the city, spanned by catwalks the width of highways, which carried us over humming turbine halls full of arcane mechanisms the size of small buildings. Fortunately I’d thought to bring a map-slate, which, together with my knack for remaining orientated in tunnel systems like this, was enough to keep Jurgen and I moving purposefully towards our destination.

‘There’s that smell again,’ Jurgen said, sniffing the air with a grimace of distaste, and, detecting the whiff of sulphur myself, I nodded.

‘We must be on the right track,’ I agreed, loosening my chain-sword in its scabbard, and unfastening the holster of my laspistol. I hadn’t forgotten the way the ’nids had infiltrated the power station in the Leeward Barrens, and intended to take no chances. (Neither had Forres, I’d been pleased to note; she’d placed sentries inside the shrine to avoid being flanked in this fashion, but so far nothing had emerged from the depths of the installation. Which, for someone as paranoid as I am, provided only limited reassurance.)

Since the map confirmed our guess, we followed our noses, emerging at last into a long gallery lined with pipes and control lecterns. Jurgen looked around, and shrugged. ‘Suppose this is it,’ he said, completely unmoved by the grandeur of the spectacle.

‘Looks like it,’ I agreed, retuning my comm-bead as I spoke. Some of the controls looked vaguely familiar, although I hadn’t spent much time taking in our surroundings during our pell-mell retreat from the power station in the Barrens. Something I certainly did remember, though, was the dry heat permeating everything, which was definitely present now, and the noxious smell which went with it, which by this time had grown to such an extent that I was forced to rely on my eyes and my ears to locate my aide. ‘Magos, can you hear me?’

‘I can,’ Izembard buzzed in my ear.

‘We’ve arrived,’ I said. ‘Where should we place the charges?’

Following his instructions didn't take as long as I'd feared, being simply a matter of setting the charges around a few of the pipes, linking them with det cord, and poking a few of the controls to maximise the build-up of pressure in the system before we blew the whole thing. After much debate over the relative merits of using a timer (which the 'nids could easily interfere with if the hive mind realised what was going on) as opposed to detonating the charges remotely by vox (which relied on the network of communication relays built into the city infrastructure to continue functioning despite the damage being inflicted by the fighting) we'd settled on both to be on the safe side; now, as I came to set the timer, I hesitated.

'Will two hours be enough, colonel?' I asked, knowing Kasteen would be monitoring the channel, and, sure enough, she replied at once.

'That should be fine,' she assured me. 'Your group will be the last out, apart from the units keeping the pads clear, so if you get back sooner than that we can detonate by vox from the air.'

'If the governor lets you,' I said, trying to sound as though I was joking, but not entirely sure I was. 'She seems pretty determined to keep the city intact.'

'I am the governor,' Kasteen said. 'At least if you meant what you said last time about backing me up if I declared martial law.'

'You have my full approval,' I said, for the record, knowing all our communications would be archived for later tactical analysis. If I didn't make it out of here after all, I might as well make things as easy as possible for her posthumously. 'I take it our plan didn't go down too well with her Excellency?'

'Not particularly,' Kasteen said, a wry tone entering her voice. 'Even when I pointed out that the city was lost whatever we did, and that sacrificing it now could save the planet.'

'But you won the argument,' I said, knowing her too well to ever assume otherwise.

'My gun did,' Kasteen replied laconically.

'Throne on Earth, you didn't actually shoot her, did you?' I asked, in some surprise.

'No, just drew it to make the point,' Kasteen said, to my quiet relief. Technically she would have been perfectly entitled to shoot the governor if she'd refused to step aside, but that would have involved an unholy amount of paperwork. 'Then I told Magot to make sure she got on the next shuttle.'

A conversation anyone in the vicinity of the boarding ramp would no doubt have found highly entertaining, I thought, then returned my attention to the job at hand. 'Two hours, Jurgen,' I confirmed, and we busied ourselves ensuring that the charges would explode on schedule.

'I'm done,' he said after a moment, and I nodded, watching the numbers tumble hypnotically in my own timer. 1:59:57... 1:59:56... 1:59:55...

Wrenching my attention away, I turned towards the exit. 'Me too,' I added.

'Better step it up,' Forres advised. 'There's a fresh wave of 'nids incoming. I don't know how long we can hold them for.'

'On our way,' I confirmed, and Jurgen and I ran for the entrance to the shrine as if an entire brood of genestealers had oozed from clefts in the rock, and were now hard on our heels.

Though Jurgen and I ran as hard as we could through the stark metal-lined corridors, over bridges and through caverns stuffed with technotheological marvels, I couldn't shake the grim premonition that we were going to be too late. 'Situation, commissar?' I voxed, as the crackle of lasgun fire began to echo down the passageway towards us.

'Grim,' Forres reported. 'We're being pushed back across the square. If you don't hurry, we won't be able to cover your withdrawal.'

'We're hurrying,' I assured her, my breath beginning to rasp in my throat. The great bronze doors were in sight at last, gaping vacantly, an inchoate flurry of movement visible beyond them. A moment later the full implication of that struck home; the Chimera which had been blocking the entrance had gone, Emperor knew where, leaving the way clear for the entire tyranid horde to come flooding inside if it so wished. 'Where's the bloody Chimera?'

'We needed it,' Forres said. 'You'll see.'

As we pelted through the doorway, out into the plaza, I could see precisely what she meant. The fresh cadaver of a carnifex was lying in the middle of the square, felled by the Chimera's multi-laser, which was continuing to fire at a second one. The AFV was backing up, trying to keep the range open, and I could hardly blame the driver for that; if the towering creature's snapping claws managed to get a purchase, it would rip the armour apart like tissue paper. The Salamander's bolter was joining in too, the trooper manning it firing with great gusto, the rain of explosive projectiles gouging ugly, ichorous craters in the hulking creature's carapace.

‘I can get a shot,’ Jurgen said, raising his melta, but before he could pull the trigger the combined fire of the two vehicles took effect, and the monster went down. Lanks’s rough riders were still roaring around, picking off the smaller creatures which infested the greater part of the plaza, but there were fewer of the rapidly-moving troopers than I remembered, and several machines lay riderless on the cavern floor.

‘Concentrated fire,’ Forres voxed, spotting us from the top turret of the Chimera. ‘Clear the way for the commissar.’

A hail of las-bolts swept the open space, taking down any tyranid foolish enough to venture out of cover, and Jurgen and I ran for it. It could only have been a hundred metres or so to safety, but it stretched out ahead of us like a landscape in a dream, where however hard you run, you seem to remain where you are.

I suppose we must have been about halfway there when the cavern floor began to vibrate beneath my feet and I staggered a little; for a moment I fancied that the explosives we’d set must have gone off prematurely for some reason, and braced myself for the pressure wave, then comprehension suddenly struck, memories of playing tag with the giant serpent among the refugee convoy flooding into my forebrain.

‘Get back,’ I voxed wildly, gesticulating with my arms, and glancing all around for some sign of where the hideous thing might be about to surface. ‘Burrower incoming!’

The Chimera began to back up, its turret traversing in search of a target, and the Salamander followed. The cyclists turned and bolted for the tunnel too, leaving Jurgen and I painfully exposed in the middle of the plaza.

Abruptly, tiles, dead ’nids and pulverised rock exploded upwards, as a huge serpentine shape surrounded by a nimbus of crackling energy erupted into the cavern.

‘Over there,’ Jurgen said matter-of-factly, as though I might have failed to notice it, and cracked off a shot with the melta. A deep channel appeared, scored into the chitinous plates which armoured it, but the subterranean behemoth barely seemed to notice, surging towards the retreating vehicles. A dazzling arc of lightning shot from it, hitting the Salamander head-on, and frying the crew; then the demo charges we’d left in the rear compartment detonated, along, I imagine, with the remaining promethium in the flamer tank.

A sound, so loud that I felt rather than heard it, slammed into me, throwing

me flat, and I skidded along the ichor-slick mosaic, before being brought to an unpleasant halt against the body of one of the fleshborer casualties. As I raised my head, dazed, I saw the tunnel collapse, the trygon crushed along with the wreckage of the Salamander by kilotonnes of plummeting granite. The long body spasmed for a moment, its head buried by a pile of boulders, from which ichor was trickling in a fashion which made my gorge rise.

‘Ironical, that,’ Jurgen said. ‘With it being a worm, and all.’

‘Quite,’ I agreed, coughing in the cloud of dust raised by the catastrophe, and gradually becoming aware of a voice in my ear.

‘Commissar,’ Forres asked, her voice quite gratifyingly strained under the circumstances, ‘are you all right?’

‘We’re alive, anyway,’ I reassured her, taking a tight grip on my weapons, as the crackle and rustle of chitin echoed all around us. There was no doubt about it, we were sealed in, without hope of escape, and surrounded by tyrannids. ‘For the moment, at least.’



## TWENTY-EIGHT

‘We can’t get to you,’ Forres said, as I cast around desperately for cover. The scuttling sound was intensifying, echoing from the tunnel the trygon had left, dispelling any doubts I might have had that tyranid reinforcements were indeed on the way. Fortunately, the last of the warrior forms in the cavern with us seemed to have been pulped by the collapsing tunnel, leaving the surviving termagants running for cover, but I was absolutely certain that the hive mind would lose no time in dispatching more of the larger creatures to restore control, and as soon as they arrived our brief respite would be well and truly over. ‘Our weapons are having no effect on the rubble.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ I said. It would be like trying to knock down a hab block with small arms fire. ‘But thanks for trying. We’ll just have to think of something for ourselves.’

‘Emperor be with you,’ Forres said, more in hope than expectation judging by the tone of her voice.

‘Can we get out through the power station?’ Jurgen asked, trotting across to join me, his face and uniform streaked with grime, and far less savoury substances from the dead tyranids he’d evidently landed among.

‘That won’t be possible,’ Izembard replied over the vox, consigning us to our doom in his usual dispassionate tone. ‘The maintenance shafts have been sealed to prevent the tyranids from using them to gain access to the upper city.’

Then there was no time left for further debate. A trio of tyranid warriors

emerged from the tunnel the dead burrower had left, their heads scanning from side to side as they absorbed the tactical situation. The termagants around us began to emerge from the shadows, bringing their weapons to bear, and so far as I could see, Jurgen and I had no more than a few seconds left to live.

I cracked off a couple of laspistol shots at the nearest of the warriors and had the satisfaction of seeing it stagger, ichorous craters appearing in its carapace; but then it recovered, retaliating with a blast from its devourer, which missed me by a handsbreadth as I dived for cover behind the downed cycle lying close to the dead trooper who'd cushioned my fall after the explosion. As the payload of acid-secreting maggots splattered against the metal, an idea struck me: an insanely risky one, but hardly less so than taking a header through a necron warp portal, and I'd emerged from that more or less intact<sup>133</sup>, albeit thanks to the fortuitous presence of a Space Marine boarding party on the vessel at the other end. I didn't suppose for one moment that the Emperor would be quite so accommodating this time, but even the slenderest chance would be better than none.

A dazzling flash and the smell of charred flesh told me that Jurgen had picked off the warrior which had just fired at me, so I stood, heaving the cycle upright, and swung myself into the saddle. It had been some time since I'd ridden a contraption like this, but fortunately the controls were all where I remembered, and I fired up the engine with a quick stab of the finger.

'Jurgen!' I called. 'Mount up!' and triggered the lasguns in the fairing. I took one of the surviving warriors square in the thorax, thereby attracting the attention not only of the one remaining, but all the termagants it was now directing.

Jurgen sprinted across to another of the abandoned bikes and clambered aboard, slinging his melta as he did so; it clanked against his lasgun, but fortunately both weapons were sufficiently rugged to withstand such minor abuse, and I had no doubt that they'd prove as effective as they always did if we needed them. 'Where are we going, sir?' he asked, as his engine roared into life.

'Throne alone knows,' I said, kicking my own steed into gear, and accelerating at a pace which would have done credit to my aide. As I did so, a volley of fleshborer and devourer rounds smeared the space I'd just left, the 'nids thrown off aim by the sudden rapid movement. It wouldn't take



them long to get their eye back in, though, so I opened the throttle as wide as it would go, and roared straight for the only exit left; the trygon tunnel.

Fortunately the huge worm had emerged at an angle, leaving a steep ramp down which I plunged, Jurgen close behind. As I flicked on the headlight the smooth, rounded walls of the tunnel became visible, our destination shrouded in darkness far beyond the range of the beam.

‘They’re following,’ Jurgen voxed, then a couple of sharp explosions echoed around us, audible even over the roaring of our engines. ‘No, they’re not.’

‘Frag grenades?’ I asked, recognising the sounds of their detonation in a confined space.

‘I had a couple with me,’ my aide confirmed. ‘They seem to have done the trick.’

‘Let’s hope the rest are as easy,’ I said, without much conviction.

As ideas go, I’ll admit, venturing into the network of tunnels dug by the tyranids wasn’t one of the brightest I’d ever had, but it certainly beat the alternative. Even the discovery that we were now out of vox contact with our comrades couldn’t take the shine off the fact that we were still alive, although, looked at dispassionately, the odds on our remaining so were hardly favourable. My instinctive affinity for underground warrens kept me more or less orientated with respect to the city we were leaving further behind with every minute that passed, but could do little else; the passages we followed twisted and turned, apparently at random, branching off in every direction, and I had no clue either to our eventual destination or to where the others might lead. The best I could do was to follow whichever path seemed to lead upwards, although all too often we found ourselves descending again before taking yet another fork which seemed more promising.

My greatest fear, which was hardly surprising under the circumstances, was that we’d run straight into another burrower, which, in the narrow confines of the tunnel, we’d never be able to avoid; but luck appeared to be with us in that regard. Though we encountered more than our fair share of ‘gaunts and warriors, the larger beasts all seemed to be committed to the assault on Primadelving, much to my relief. Our forward-facing lasguns cut down most of the creatures we encountered easily enough, supplemented on occasion by a blast from Jurgen’s melta, which he’d rested across the

handlebars, and a couple of times I administered the *coup de grace* with my chainsword, striking out at one of the more resilient organisms as we hurtled past, our tracks crushing the fallen to pulp as we jolted over them.

‘How long’s it been, sir?’ Jurgen asked, and reminded of the passage of time I glanced at my chronograph.

‘Too long,’ I said succinctly. The timers we’d set were still counting inexorably down, and by my estimation Forres and her forlorn hope would have made it to the shuttles by now, if any of them had managed to reach the surface at all. ‘We’ve got about twenty minutes before the charges go off.’

No sooner had I spoken than a dull rumble made the rocks quiver around us, and I cursed under my breath. The last of the shuttles must have left the pad, and, unwilling to wait or trust to the timers, Kasteen had given the order to detonate by vox. Which I could hardly blame her for under the circumstances, as in her position I’d certainly consider us dead by now. A rising wind began to chase us down the tunnel, and I rammed the already fully open throttle hard against its stop, desperate to squeeze a little more speed out of the hurtling cycle.

‘That’ll give ’em something to think about,’ Jurgen said, with every sign of satisfaction.

‘Us too,’ I said, able to picture the devastation behind us all too easily. No longer confined, the magma would burst up, and out, scouring its way through the caverns to the surface; but the noxious gases, and perhaps even the lava flow, would exploit every other conduit too, including this one. By my reckoning we had only seconds before the white-hot pressure wave tore us apart, reducing us to ashes in the process.

Then, just as I’d almost given up hope, the headlights appeared to brighten, reflecting back from blue, crystalline walls, instead of the dull bedrock we’d travelled through for so long.

‘Ice!’ Jurgen said, putting the thought into words, as we continued to hurtle upwards, the rumbling behind us swelling in volume with every heartbeat. ‘We must be near the surface!’

‘Let’s hope it’s near enough,’ I said, an instant before my cycle plunged into a wall of snow which blocked the passage completely. Stunned and blinded, I clung on to the handlebars for dear life, somehow retaining enough presence of mind to trigger the lasguns; they fired with a muffled *crack!*, audible even through the snow clogging my ears, although whether

it made a difference or not I couldn't truly say. An instant later I'd burst through into daylight and the familiar bone-freezing cold, parting company with my machine as we performed a far from elegant parabola through the air, which terminated in another snowbank. (Quite fortuitously, it occurred to me later, as if I'd hit one of the outcrops of ice I'd have suffered considerably more than the bruises and headcold which actually ensued.)

As I rolled to my feet, looking about us for enemies, Jurgen followed; although I'm bound to say he remained seated, landing with a jolt which did the bike's suspension no favours, before curving back to see how I was. On the other hand, I suppose, I'd cleared most of the snow out of his way with my head, so his egress was considerably easier.

An instant later, a plume of ash, dust, and incandescent embers burst from the tunnel mouth, knocking me flat again, the heat beating against my face and flashing the surrounding snow to steam. Unaccustomed as I was to feeling warm on the surface of *Nusquam Fundamentibus*, I still felt a shiver at the thought of how close we'd come to being seared to death.

'Looks like we got out just in time,' Jurgen said, his back to the plume beside us, which, following the direction of his gaze, I could well understand. A few kilometres distant, the whole sky appeared to be boiling, a vast column of smoke and ash rising almost to the stratosphere, flattening and spreading outwards as though against an invisible roof. Dull rumblings emerged from the centre of the cloud, which was riven by flashes of lightning, and I spat a thick gobbet of dust from my mouth. I couldn't be certain at this distance, but something huge appeared to be caught in the middle of the maelstrom, trying to rise for a moment, before sinking back, burning and desiccated.

'Looks like we did,' I agreed, plodding off to retrieve my cycle, which was looking more than a little battered by this time. Here and there, in the distance, other plumes marked breaches in the network of tunnels, and I resolved to give them as wide a berth as I could. It was hard to imagine any tyranids surviving the inferno sweeping through them, but Jurgen and I had escaped, and I knew all too well that it was fatal to underestimate their resilience. 'Any idea how far it is to Underice?'

Jurgen shook his head dubiously. 'It'll take at least a day on these things. Maybe two.'

'Then we'd better get going,' I said, inspecting my machine for signs of damage before giving up and mounting it anyway. The way it looked now,

I'd save a lot of time just looking for anything that didn't seem broken. Then I stopped, shading my eyes, and gazing into the distance. A bright dot, reflecting the sunshine, was circling the ash plume, and my heart leapt with sudden hope. 'Maybe we won't have to.'

'Looks like a shuttle,' Jorgen agreed, producing an amplivisor from somewhere in the recesses of his greatcoat. 'Too far away to make out the type though.'

'Who cares?' I said, and activated my comm-bead. 'Unidentified shuttle, this is Commissar Ciaphas Cain, requesting extraction. You may home on this signal.'

'We were informed of your demise,' an unfamiliar voice said. It was, however, unusually deep and resonant, even through the tiny earpiece, and I was sure I'd heard the like before. 'I will inform your regiment of the error.'

'It's a Thunderhawk,' Jorgen confirmed, as the distant dropship turned and began moving in our direction. 'The Space Marines have arrived.'

I shrugged. 'Better late than never, I suppose,' I said.



## TWENTY-NINE

If being plucked from the snows by Space Marines had been a surprise, our reception when we boarded the Thunderhawk was positively astonishing. My time with the Reclaimers had accustomed me to the superhuman stature of the Adeptus Astartes, so that had come as no surprise, but the magenta-armoured giant waiting at the foot of the boarding ramp had presented arms as Jurgen and I approached, as though we were honoured guests.

I'd been even more taken aback once we'd boarded; instead of taking us to the Imperial Guard staging post at Underice, the dropship had lifted its nose, climbing smoothly and rapidly into space. As the sky darkened around us, and I was able to look down and see the hideous scar smeared across the face of the blue-white planet below, I tried questioning our hosts; but, though polite, they were not exactly forthcoming.

'Your presence has been requested,' the squad leader told me, easy to pick out from among his comrades by virtue of the power sword he wore, even though the iconography of this particular Chapter meant nothing to me. Beyond that he said nothing, although the mystery was swiftly solved; as we rounded the vast bulk of the orbital docks, I was able to make out a pair of vessels orbiting nearby, in close formation. One was a Space Marine strike cruiser, differing in a few details from the *Revenant*, aboard which I'd spent an eventful cruise with the Reclaimers in search of a space hulk better left alone, but similar enough to be instantly recognisable for what it was. The other ship was considerably smaller, sleek and deadly, elegant as a jewelled dagger, and this too I recognised at once.

‘The *Externus Exterminatus*,’ Jurgen remarked, as though the sight of Amberley’s private yacht was merely an everyday occurrence.

‘You’re absolutely certain?’ Amberley asked, over a more than welcome meal in her private quarters, after an even more welcome bath and change of clothes.

I shrugged, articulating as best I could round a mouthful of ambull steak. ‘You’d have to ask the magos. But he seems pretty convinced.’ I swallowed, washing it down with a sip of the remarkably pleasant vintage she’d chosen to accompany it. ‘But I don’t see why it matters when the ’nids got there. Most of them went up with the hive node, and the rest should be easy enough to pick off.’

‘Because the first recorded contact with the tyranids was just two hundred years ago,’ Amberley said, speaking slowly and distinctly, like my old schola tutors used to do when I was missing a point they thought was obvious, ‘and according to your friend Izembard these have been there for millennia.’

‘Maybe they’ve been around longer than anyone thought,’ I suggested. ‘Could you check the records?’ If anyone was likely to have evidence to support that assumption, it would be the Ordo Xenos, the branch of the Inquisition she worked for.

‘No need,’ she said. ‘Without wanting to bore you with the details,’ which was a polite way of saying I didn’t have the clearance to know, ‘there have been a few incidents which might possibly be earlier incursions. But the earliest of those was in M35.’

‘The ones we found had been on Nusquam Fundamentibus a lot longer than that,’ I said. ‘So what were they doing there?’

Amberley chewed her lower lip thoughtfully, in a manner I’d always found fetching. ‘Advance scouts, perhaps. But the thing that really worries me is how many more dormant broods there might be scattered around the Imperium.’

‘Who cares?’ I said. ‘So long as they remain dormant.’

‘This one didn’t,’ Amberley said. ‘If another hive fleet attacks, and they’ve got assets in place behind our lines, it could get even messier than last time.’

I shrugged. ‘What are the chances of that?’ I wondered aloud. ‘Another hive fleet the size of Behemoth? Pretty remote, I’d have thought.’ Which

just goes to prove what a lousy prophet I'd make.

'Maybe.' Amberley shrugged too, apparently dismissing the matter. 'Do you think your regiment wants you back right away?'

'I'm sure they can do without me for a while,' I said. Our orders had been to remain until the planet was secure, which would take months, or even years if I was lucky<sup>134</sup>. It had been some time since we'd last been able to enjoy one another's company, and I was certainly in no rush to part again.

'Good,' Amberley said, favouring me with a smile I knew all too well. 'Then perhaps you and Jurgen could help me with another little matter while they get on with things here.'

[At which point the narrative abruptly concludes, with a few unflattering remarks I see no reason to repeat.]

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## NOTES

1. *The site of his less than peaceful retirement.*
2. *Varan the Undefeatable, Warmaster of the Chaos invasion of 999. M41, whose no doubt self-ascribed nickname fortunately proved to be a little on the optimistic side.*
3. *A world, and its surrounding system, given over entirely to the resupply and redeployment of the Imperial Guard regiments active in the Damocles Gulf; if you think of it as the Munitorum equivalent of an Adeptus Mechanicus forge-world, you won't go far wrong, although on the whole it was rather less grubby.*
4. *As so often in his memoirs, Cain appears genuinely unaware of the magnitude of his contribution to the defeat of the Emperor's enemies. Had he not been there, the forces of the Imperium would undoubtedly have been victorious in the long run, but at considerably greater cost in both time and lives.*
5. *Valhallans retain a visceral loathing of greenskins from the time of the failed invasion of their home world, and particularly relish the chance to bring the Emperor's retribution to their ancestral enemies.*
6. *Probably.*
7. *Possibly.*
8. *The difficulty of completely eradicating an orkish infestation once they've gained a foothold is proverbial; on world after world fresh warbands continue to appear years, or even decades, after the most comprehensive of greenskin defeats. The Magos Biologis have their*



*own theories about why this should be the case; if they're correct, the only remarkable thing is the length of time which sometimes elapses before a fresh generation becomes numerous enough to cause trouble.*

*9. Apart from Cain's, presumably.*

*10. A select group of veterans which didn't include Sulla, who joined the 296th a few years after the Nusquan campaign. Kasteen and Broklaw had both been present, however, as recently-inducted recruits to their respective regiments.*

*11. A lesson apparently lost on at least one member of his audience.*

*12. Though Sulla clearly couldn't be bothered to look up the appropriate statistics, approximately thirty-five per cent of the Nusquan population live in the Leeward Barrens and surrounding provinces, which included the planetary capital and its satellite cavern cities.*

*13. The planetary capital.*

*14. Given that Cain is writing with hindsight, this is almost certainly a piece of hyperbole for dramatic effect.*

*15. Sulla had served as the 296th's quartermaster sergeant, until the tyranids opened the way for her elevation to a commission by eating most of their existing officers.*

*16. Which included the 597th's logistical support units.*

*17. As opposed to those of fleet auxiliaries, which, despite being cargo vessels, were Imperial Navy ships aboard which the appropriate military dress codes were to be expected.*

*18. The Commissariat being quick to see the advantages of one of their number appearing popular with the troops he led for once.*

*19. So I would hope.*

*20. Clearly successfully enough to avoid irritating Cain, since he fails to mention any of the dozens of crew members he would have encountered every day simply by walking down a corridor on a vessel that size.*

*21. A Landing Zone already under enemy fire.*

*22. The colonel and second-in-command would never travel in the same shuttle, as if it were downed by accident or a lucky enemy shot, the regiment they led would be effectively decapitated.*

*23. It seems to date back to the Horus Heresy, when the loyalty of the crew couldn't be taken entirely for granted, and the presence on the*

*bridge at every crucial juncture of someone with a gun was an essential guarantor of good faith.*

*24. The natives of iceworlds seem relatively immune to degrees of cold most other Imperial citizens would consider unbearable, and only bother bundling up when conditions become harsh enough to remind them of home.*

*25. Probably because his ship just happened to be in the Coronus system at the time, and was the first with sufficient cargo space for the 597th and their equipment to come up on someone's list of available vessels.*

*26. A gesture common throughout the region, in which the thumb is folded into the palm of the hand, so that the fingers resemble an Imperial aquila wing. Cain mentions doing so himself, at least figuratively, at several points in his memoirs.*

*27. And a reliable one, having encountered rogue psykers on several occasions prior to this.*

*28. Most people outside the Ordo Malleus only do so once, and most of those not for very long, which makes Cain's survival of these multiple encounters remarkable to say the least.*

*29. Jurgen was a blank, one of the incredibly rare individuals with a degree of natural immunity to all forms of warpcraft; which in no small measure accounts for Cain having, as previously noted, faced daemons on multiple occasions while surviving to tell the tale.*

*30. In all probability it was a little of both.*

*31. Though many members of the Ecclesiarchy attached to Imperial Guard regiments retain their priestly vestments, a substantial number, which apparently included Tope, prefer to adopt the uniform of their hosts, with appropriate modification.*

*32. Presumably at this scale the curvature of the planet's orbit wasn't obvious, or, if it was, Cain doesn't bother to mention it.*

*33. The Adeptus Mechanicus engineers attached to the regiment, generally responsible for maintaining the 597th's vehicles and equipment.*

*34. Most unlikely; they may have been a little stronger than his natural ones, but hardly to that extent.*

*35. Or been unable to disengage in time, the procedure for doing so being both long and complex.*

36. With power cut to the engines in one part of the array, the asymmetric thrust would nudge the ship a little to one side.

37. Mires would have to have waited until he was sure of his angle of approach to the void station before issuing the order; otherwise it could simply have made matters worse.

38. A common precaution, particularly on merchant vessels and the lighter classes of warship, as the intervening layers of hull provide extra protection from incoming fire.

39. Sulla's description of these events dwell on his 'noble bearing' and 'manifest fortitude' at inordinate length, so he must have fooled at least one of those present; but as her account adds nothing of note to Cain's, I've been spared the necessity of inflicting any more of it on my readers at this juncture.

40. Swimming being a skill which very few Valhallans acquire, given that water exists naturally on their home world only as a solid.

41. An agile, fast-moving sauropod used as mounts by the rough riders of the Imperial Guard regiments from that singularly unpleasant world. The undomesticated ones are vicious, quarrelsome, and inclined to savage any living creature in their immediate vicinity, which remains more or less true for the ones broken to the saddle. And their riders too, come to think of it.

42. Something of an exaggeration, but less so than it may seem; the heavy cargo shuttles the bay was designed to serve would take up a considerable amount of room even at rest, and would also require space to manoeuvre, particularly when several were arriving and departing at once.

43. Though Cain encountered both craftworld eldar and their Chaos-touched kin on several occasions during his eventful career, whenever he refers to them in passing he seems unaware of, or, more likely, indifferent to, the distinction.

44. A general instruction over the vox-net, presumably, though he doesn't bother to mention that specifically.

45. An Imperial Guard term for a rear guard, or similarly exposed detachment, detailed to cover a retreat or otherwise protect the main body of troops; the low chance of survival contingent on such a task being reflected in the name.

46. Cain seems oblivious to the unintended pun here.

47. Generally favoured by Valhallan regiments fighting in urban environments, or on garrison duty; out in the snowfields, they tend to adopt winter camouflage patterns, for obvious reasons.

48. Almost certainly the latter, as orks are seldom disciplined enough to stay out of a fight if there's one in the vicinity, however prudent it would be to guard their flanks.

49. Evidently brighter than most of his kind, who, under most circumstances, will drive flat out whatever the probable consequences.

50. Or disdained as insufficiently orky.

51. Knowing orks, probably both.

52. Any readers wanting further details of this stage of the campaign are referred to Sulla's memoirs, where it's dealt with at inordinate length, if they feel the relatively minor clarification such reading would offer is really worth the effort.

53. Although Cain appears to have been on first name terms with the governor, which implies some degree of social contact, he gives little indication of how often, and under what circumstances, they met one another during his sojourn in Primadelving.

54. The Adeptus Arbites had a theoretical presence on Nusquam Fundumentibus, overseeing the local law enforcement agencies, but, like many backwater worlds, this amounted to a single Arbitrator and a small administrative staff, who would be more than happy to palm off the responsibility for any civil emergencies they conceivably could to the locals and any Imperial Guard units which happened to be in the vicinity.

55. Or somewhere in the same building, anyway.

56. Being an Imperial institution, the Adeptus Mechanicus remained free of the cultural gender bias which made men in positions of authority on Nusquam Fundumentibus a comparative rarity.

57. The area around Primadelving.

58. A Valhallan expression for someone naive and inexperienced, too foolish even to take elementary precautions against frostbite.

59. Though much of what passes for commerce among the orks falls somewhere between barter and theft, they do have a rudimentary monetary system, based around the use of their own teeth (or preferably someone else's) as a form of currency.

60. The power generated was transmitted to centres of habitation and

industry by focused beams of energy, since conditions on the surface would make distribution by wire too vulnerable to climactic disruption. Given the relatively low volume of air traffic on Nusquam Fundumentibus this was less of a hazard to navigation than one might expect, although one or two cases of concussion from being struck by barbecued avians were recorded annually by the Nusquan medicae.

61. Cain presumably having drawn his laspistol at some point, although he doesn't bother to mention the fact.

62. The creatures apparently having arrived on Simia Orichalcae through the necron warp portal, from some other world infested by both.

63. In spite of which, Cain's powers of recall seem remarkably acute in his memoirs; either stimulated by the recollection of events in relative tranquillity, or being judiciously supplemented by a fair amount of artistic licence.

64. Or possibly both.

65. Or possibly the reverse. Termagants, which by Cain's account made up a high proportion of the swarm, will instinctively retreat to cover in the absence of any overriding directive from the hive mind.

66. Other than to prime it, presumably.

67. An Imperial Guard euphemism for the mercy killing of critically injured comrades.

68. Evidently dropping at least one of the weapons...

69. A notable Imperial victory, won under Sulla's generalship some fifty years later.

70. Fortunately without having the faintest idea of the actual answer.

71. Presumably Cain means the system as a whole rather than the planet which shares its name; a common source of confusion in Imperial nomenclature.

72. Tracked vehicles with wide treads, particularly suited to the kind of conditions prevailing on an iceworld. In the absence of a road network, which would have been impossible to keep clear in any case, they were the primary means of transport on Nusquam Fundumentibus.

73. Which implies four full squads, plus the command element, Forres, any aides she had with her, and the Chimera crews. Rather a small platoon: clearly Cain wasn't exaggerating about their combat

losses earlier.

74. The second crewman would be in charge of monitoring the on-board equipment, leaving the pilot free to fly the aircraft without distraction.

75. Another natural consequence of growing up in an underhive, where confined spaces and abyssal shafts are simply part of the environment.

76. Water being a great deal easier to obtain on a world covered in ice than soil would have been.

77. Or the aircraft's patrol pattern had moved it temporarily out of range.

78. Kasteen presumably having passed on the details Cain requested to the squad leader too, unless he did this himself.

79. Generally while accompanied by Jurgen, whose ability to neutralise psychic phenomena apparently disrupted the synaptic link between the various organisms of a swarm equally effectively.

80. Situation report, as soon as possible, a particularly egregious example of the military mania for abbreviation.

81. Which is why so many orks find this kind of weapon appealing, of course, although I suspect few members of the Commissariat would thank you for the comparison.

82. It's not always true that the largest creatures in a tyranid swarm are the ones through which the hive mind focuses its control of those around it, but it's a good enough rule of thumb to be trusted by troopers who've fought tyranids before and managed to survive the encounter.

83. Surface transportation on an iceworld rarely maintains a reliable schedule, and there isn't always someone available to admit a crawler when it arrives at its destination.

84. Technically, the Valkyries were armed transports rather than dedicated weapon platforms, like the Vendetta variant, but more than capable of carrying out a seek and destroy mission against unarmoured infantry nevertheless.

85. A frequently observed phenomenon, apparently the result of some form of psychic feedback.

86. Despite the size of the target, the range would still be extreme for a pistol shot, so it's hardly surprising she didn't hit the mark

consistently.

87. *Something of an exaggeration, as recruiting among the militia was continuing at more or less the same rate as before, although most of the newly-inducted troopers were going to replace combat losses in the existing companies rather than swell the ranks of those which still existed only on paper.*

88. *Although he doesn't bother to specify which they were, the minutes of the meeting record the presence of a delegate from the Arbitrator's office, several members of the Administratum, a cardinal from the cathedral, presumably there to provide purely spiritual support as the Orders Militant of the Adepta Sororitas had no members currently active on Nusquam Fundamentibus, and a senior astropath from the Choir in Primadelving.*

89. *Which makes her considerably more far-sighted than Inquisitor Kryptmann, whose attempt to pull off the same trick on a galactic scale left an unholy mess for the Ordo Xenos to sort out.*

90. *Not entirely true; they also had three Aquila class shuttles on the roster, although one of these was undergoing a routine refit at the time and was unavailable for use.*

91. *An assumption which was most certainly correct.*

92. *Some sites, like the remaining power stations, were too vital to abandon completely, their skeleton staffs supplemented by no doubt terrified local troopers, whose Valkyries stood ready to pluck them to safety should their defences be breached.*

93. *Fungi of various sorts being a staple on many worlds where the bulk of the population live underground, for obvious reasons.*

94. *If it suited him to believe that, far be it from me to take the credit.*

95. *A Nusquan slang term for those living in small, outlying communities; the faintly pejorative implication of the phrase being that the townships in question are so small and lacking in resources that they've only been dug out of the ice and snow, instead of the bedrock beneath.*

96. *As the Commissariat doesn't have a hierarchical structure, like that of the Imperial Guard, seniority is determined purely by length of service and number of commendations. In the last century or so the convention of referring to the longest serving and most decorated veterans as lord (or lady) Commissars has gained some currency,*

*although Cain, who would most certainly have qualified for such an honorific, disdained the practice, and always refused to be addressed in such a manner.*

*97. One of the many indications in the portion of his memoirs dealing with his time attached to the 597th of the unusual closeness he shared with the senior officers of that regiment. Very few commissars would be prepared to exchange friendly banter with the officers they served with, or feel comfortable doing so.*

*98. Something of an exaggeration, although, as noted before, flying conditions on Nusquam Fundamentibus were far from ideal; and there were indeed prolonged periods where nothing could take to the air.*

*99. As on most worlds, the Planetary Governor of Nusquam Fundamentibus was also the Commander in Chief of its planetary and system defence forces, at least on paper; although only the governors of highly militarised societies, such as those of Cadia or Gulfsedge, tend to actively participate in their activities on a day to day basis.*

*100. Though Cain spent most of his life in the Damocles Gulf and adjoining sectors, he did range further afield on occasion; there's some evidence that he visited Valhalla towards the end of his attachment to the 597th, for instance, and he makes reference on a few occasions to having set foot on Holy Terra itself, although the circumstances under which he may have done so are hard to imagine. The vast majority of the datafiles making up his memoirs have still to be examined in all but the most cursory fashion, however, so it's quite possible that these may shed a little more light on the subject.*

*101. Not an option which Cain generally favoured, incidentally, being both possessed of sufficient charm to sway opinion his way under most circumstances, and conscious that resorting to more direct methods of persuasion would generally result in bad feeling, often expressed in an equally straightforward fashion should the opportunity to do so arise.*

*102. More likely she'd simply seen the opportunity to distance herself from a potentially unpopular decision, and seized on it.*

*103. Cain seems to be missing the point here; no doubt Sulla was taking personal charge of security for the convoy because of his presence.*

*104. Which implies, although he doesn't bother to mention their intended destination, that the convoy he joined was bound for the*



*cavern city of Underice, the second largest settlement on Nusquam Fundumentibus.*

*105. Presumably the tops of the shafts which afforded natural illumination to the inhabitants of the cavern city.*

*106. Though roads as such were unknown on Nusquam Fundumentibus, the easiest routes between cities became well worn from frequent use, and could often be distinguished by the naked eye.*

*107. Perhaps typically, it doesn't seem to have occurred to him that most of the passengers were simply in awe of his reputation.*

*108. It's unclear here whether he means the other passengers, or Sulla, who would of course be listening to him over the vox-net.*

*109. A widespread belief among Imperial Guardsmen who've encountered these creatures, and who therefore regard them with particular horror, although the very notion is, of course, ridiculous: anyone swallowed whole would expire almost instantly from suffocation, and being crushed in the bioform's constricting gullet. Which isn't all that reassuring, come to think of it.*

*110. In fact, her account of the incident goes on at some length about his keen intelligence and unrivalled insight, so clearly she was impressed by the accuracy of his deduction.*

*111. Though Sulla appears to have been in overall command throughout the engagement, the 597th's Sentinel troop was attached to 3rd Company, along with the other specialised units; so, on paper at least, wasn't under her direct authority. Even if it had been, Sentinel pilots have a well-deserved reputation in the Imperial Guard for acting on their own initiative without reference to the command structure, so Shambas's display of independent thought here is far from untypical.*

*112. An impression which Sulla's rather more long-winded description of their actions confirms; the detached squadron (she mentions a third Sentinel, so either Cain forgot the name of one of the pilots, or they were so used to working together it wasn't necessary to issue specific orders to him or her) were able to trap the approaching warrior forms in a withering crossfire, using their speed and manoeuvrability to remain beyond the effective range of the devourers most of the tyranids carried.*

*113. Presumably because they were too busy being killed to act as an effective conduit for the hive mind.*

114. *It's unclear where the rest of the Sentinels were at this point: although it's probable that they found their lines of fire blocked by the other vehicles in the convoy.*

115. *Like most Imperial Guard units, the command squads of the 597th at both company and platoon level consisted of an officer and four specialists to assist them, occasionally supplemented by advisors of one sort or another; chief among which was Cain himself.*

116. *A common modification to Valhallan vehicles, although their use on the move is not without hazard.*

117. *Nusquam Fundumentibus having a roughly thirty-five hour day.*

118. *Housing, as it did, the main base of the local forces, this area was closed to civilian traffic.*

119. *Much to the irritation of generations of scribes and codicers, who are thereby obliged to amend cherished inventories, often to something resembling objective reality.*

120. *An excuse I've heard a few times too, although once you've mentioned you want information on behalf of the Inquisition, even the most obdurate of bureaucrats generally becomes remarkably helpful.*

121. *Not to mention the fact that, if she tried, Kasteen would simply declare martial law, leaving the erstwhile governor completely without influence.*

122. *Typically, it doesn't seem to have occurred to Cain that a considerable amount of Forres's change in attitude was due to her following his example; or at least what she fondly imagined that to be.*

123. *A striking natural feature in one of the caverns, which had been preserved as a park.*

124. *First and Fifth Companies undertook the surface defence of Primadelving, along with the Sentinel troop; the other line companies were still engaged in harrying the outlying swarms.*

125. *Rather a grandiose title for half a dozen rockcrete pads, standing next to tunnels giving directly to an underground staging area, which enabled passengers and cargo to embark or disembark with a minimum of exposure to the freezing temperatures on the surface.*

126. *A main highway connecting the industrial caverns to the residential units on the upper levels.*

127. *As Soon As Possible, one of the more exotic examples of the*

*Imperial Guard's mania for abbreviation, in that it consists of four letters rather than the usual three. Somewhat disconcertingly pronounced 'ae-sap:' I ask you, what's wrong with plain Gothic?*

*128. Like many cities on worlds with inhospitable surfaces, many of the buildings were partially buried in the sides of the interconnecting caverns, so that a series of terraced structures and streets rose up the walls, making maximum use of the space. The gubernatorial palace would, of course, be sited where it was most prominent, reassuring the citizens of the Imperium's constant vigilance.*

*129. The Spiral wasn't a literal one, but was so named because the highway descended through half a dozen different caverns, each lower than the next.*

*130. And beyond, the broad highway of the Spiral terminating comfortably close to both the shuttle pads and the crawler park.*

*131. The popular image of these units is of cavalry, and the vast majority of rough rider units do, of course, use horses or other riding beasts to great effect: horses are at home in terrain no vehicle can tackle, are self-fuelling in many environments instead of relying on the proximity of a promethium supply, and are able to replace their own losses to some extent. Some regiments do use light all-terrain vehicles instead, however, particularly those from iceworlds or other environments where the raising of livestock is less than practical.*

*132. Slate of Organisation and Equipment, a slightly archaic term referring to the inventory of regimental assets and their disposition.*

*133. Almost certainly the only human ever to have survived such a transit.*

*134. Though the few surviving active tyranids were swiftly dealt with, the campaign to track down and eliminate the remaining greenskins from the Great Spinal Range was both protracted and bloody; and even now the planetary defence force remains on permanent alert against a resurgence of either foe.*

# THE GREATER GOOD

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



### *Editorial Note:*

*This latest extract from the memoirs of Ciaphas Cain is of interest in several respects, not least in the insights it gives into the workings of tau diplomacy, a weapon in their arsenal at least as potent as a cadre of battlesuits, if rather less liable to make a mess of the carpet.*

*Although the tau empire is currently co-operating with the Imperium in a joint campaign against the tyranid hive fleets, they can hardly be considered reliable allies, given their notorious opportunism and their obsessive pursuit of the so-called ‘Greater Good.’ Which, let us be clear, would be rather more accurately translated into Gothic as ‘the Greater Good of the Tau, and the warp take the rest.’ I leave drawing any parallel with our own attitude towards the arrangement to those more cynical than I.*

*Which brings us back to Cain who, if not instrumental in the forging of the pact, undoubtedly played a major role in preventing its premature dissolution, which would have been to the ruination of us all. His motives for so doing were, of course, entirely personal, at least by his own account. As ever, I leave it to the reader to weigh how far he may be taken at his word.*

*As has become my habit over the preceding volumes I have left his narrative as close to how I found it as possible, doing little more than breaking it down into chapters for ease of reading, and inserting additional explanatory material whenever required to elucidate the occasional obscure reference, or provide the wider context generally*

*lacking in his woefully self-centred account of events.*

*Amberley Vail, Ordo Xenos.*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## ONE

Say what you like about the tau, and I've said plenty myself over the years, they know how to put on a good war. In fact, if you ask me, they were making rather too good a job of it in the closing phases of the Quadravidia campaign; I'd been expecting a hard fight, having butted heads with the little blue<sup>1</sup> blighters on more than one occasion, but they were giving us a lot worse than that. By the time I arrived in the capital, dodging plasma bolts every foot of the way, our defences were crumbling all over the planet, and it was clearly only a matter of time before they overran the last remaining Imperial enclave altogether.

'Quadravidia cannot be allowed to fall,' General Braddick insisted, in flat-out contravention of what everyone crowded into the command bunker beneath what was left of the local Guard garrison already knew to be inevitable, the febrile glow in the depths of his slate-grey eyes making the unhealthy pallor of his skin even more noticeable. You can only substitute recaff and stimms for sleep for so long, and the time to redress the balance in his case was well and truly past. He raised his voice over the distant rumble of exploding ordnance, which, to my distinct and well-concealed alarm, was noticeably louder than it had been that morning. As if to underline the fact, dust motes jarred from some recess near the ceiling tumbled lazily in the shafts of setting sunlight sneaking in through the firing slits. 'If it does, the entire subsector goes with it.'

Which was why the tau had struck at Quadravidia in the first place, of course, its position at the nexus of several warp routes making it the natural

conduit for Imperial military transports on their way to prop up the steadily eroding buffer zone between the two powers.

‘That may be overstating the case a little,’ I said, brushing my sleeve free of the specks which had settled there, and trying not to sound as if retreat was the best option I could think of by a long way. ‘But the general is quite correct in considering the ramifications of an orderly withdrawal.’ Which were more than likely to include a firing squad for cowardice and incompetence, at least so far as he was concerned. Hardly fair, given that he’d hung on grimly in the face of overwhelming odds for months; but someone would have to take the blame for the fiasco, and it certainly wasn’t going to be the morons from the Munitorum who’d sent the Guard in under-strength and under-equipped in the first place.

‘You think we should pull out?’ one of the senior staffers asked, spotting a potential lifeline: if the celebrated Ciaphas Cain recommended turning tail, they could hardly be blamed for following my advice. That was what commissars were supposed to be for, after all, considering the wider picture.

‘I’d be on the first shuttle,’ I said, completely truthfully, with just enough of a smile to make them think I was only joking. ‘But as General Braddick has just pointed out, that isn’t, unfortunately, an option.’ Not because I was having an uncharacteristic rush of noble self-sacrifice to the head, you understand, but because anything larger than a servo-skull taking to the air would be shot down by the tau before it had time to clear the pad, and we didn’t have anything left in orbit capable of making warp in any case.

As if to underline my words, and because the Emperor sometimes shows a taste for the dramatic as well as a nasty sense of humour, a faint tremor shook the command bunker, and another rain of dust pattered off the peak of my cap.

‘Reinforcements are on the way,’ Braddick said, in the tone of a man who hopes to make it true by saying so with sufficient conviction, and I nodded.

‘They were certainly due to be dispatched,’ I agreed, clinging to the faint shred of hope even more tightly than the general. I’d been assured of that just prior to my own departure, aboard the small relief flotilla which had arrived about six weeks before, and which my old dining companion Lord General Zyvan<sup>2</sup> had hoped would prove sufficient to bolster our defences until he could pull a large enough task force together to raise the siege and send the tau scuttling for home. And so it would have done, if the tau hadn’t had the same idea, and sent a relieving force of their own to match it.



On the plus side, I suppose, we'd managed to deprive the xenos of the easy victory they'd hoped for, and would undoubtedly have seized by now if the extra division of Catachans I'd arrived with hadn't proved so tenacious, but from where I was sitting it looked uncomfortably as though all we'd managed to do was delay the inevitable. I was sure Zyvan was doing his best to get a proper relief force together, but the tyranid hive fleets had been striking ever deeper into the heart of the Imperium over the past few years, and all too many of our resources were being diverted to contain them; the promised reinforcements could take months to arrive, if they even got here at all.

'Then we hang on,' Braddick said, his shoulders slumping with weary resolution, at odds with the sharp creases of his typically ornate Mordian tunic, and I nodded soberly.

'I don't see that we've any other choice,' I agreed, all too conscious of the irony.

The thing was, you see, that I needn't even have been there in the first place. My current position, Commissarial Liaison Officer to the Lord General's staff, had left me in a position to pick and choose my assignments to a far greater extent than I'd ever dreamed possible in the earlier stages of my long and inglorious career, where circumstance and the long arm of the Commissariat had kept shoving me into harm's way despite my best efforts to let it gallop past unimpeded. Of course my entirely unmerited reputation for dauntless courage and flamboyant derring-do meant that I was hardly in a position to follow my natural inclination and remain indefinitely on Coronus,<sup>3</sup> watching my aide, Jurgen, deal with most of the paperwork passing through my office while I wondered how soon I could slope off for lunch. Maintaining it meant showing my face at the front line from time to time, to encourage the troops and remind Zyvan how lucky he was to have me around, while keeping as far from the enemy as possible in the process.

With this in mind, a quick jaunt to Quadravidia had seemed just the ticket; as I said, we'd expected the relief flotilla I'd hitched a ride with to tip the balance of the war there decisively in our favour, so I should have been able to keep out of trouble without too much difficulty once we'd arrived. More to the point, it would keep me comfortably out of the way of the encroaching hive fleets. I had no desire to end up as a blob of goo in a reclamation pool somewhere, which seemed all too likely if someone decided they needed a Hero of the Imperium around to keep the troops

steady in the face of so many scuttling horrors. So, making myself scarce while the high command drew up their plans for the latest attempt to contain the tyrannid menace was only prudent.

To cut a long and dismal story short, we arrived in good order, and disembarked by drop-ship, the orbital side of the starport facilities having failed to survive the first tau onslaught.<sup>4</sup> We were harried a bit on the way down, of course, but the Navy had enough fighters still in the air to keep most of the fleas off our backs, and we took only a few losses, digging in around the planetary capital for the most part. Braddick and his Mordians were delighted to see us, especially once our first counter-attack had thrown back the enemy forces to the outer hab ring, and for the first week or so it really looked as if we had the xenos on the run; although I was seasoned enough a campaigner to realise that reclaiming the entire world would be a long and arduous process.

So much the better, I'd thought, envisaging a long spell comfortably behind the firing line, while Zyvan and the Navy got ready to tackle the 'nids. With any luck I could spin things out here long enough to get back to Coronus well after their departure.

So the appearance in orbit a fortnight later of a fleet of tau 'merchantmen'<sup>5</sup> came as a pretty unpleasant surprise. By luck or base cunning, probably the latter knowing them, they popped into the system a couple of days after the Imperial flotilla had left for Coronus, and had a clear run for the planet, the gunboats of the SDF<sup>6</sup> having been swept from the sky in the course of the first incursion.

All of which left me without the proverbial paddle. I wasn't dead yet, though, and I'd been in tighter spots than this before now, so I dispensed a few encouraging platitudes, bade everyone in the bunker a good night, and withdrew, ostensibly to go and make sure the troopers on our perimeter were keeping up to the mark. I was by no means certain the final assault would come tonight, but if it did, the command bunker would be a singularly unhealthy place to be. I had no doubt that the technosorcery of the tau would have pinpointed it to the millimetre, and that it was top of the list for a visit from one of their strike teams.

'Good meeting, sir?' Jurgen asked, materialising from the shadows, his unique and earthy aroma greeting me a good three seconds before he had time to open his mouth.

'I've had better,' I admitted, with more candour than I'd normally employ.

But Jurgen had served with me for nigh on seventy years by that point, saving my miserable hide more often than either of us could count, and I owed him as much honesty as I ever gave anyone.

Our brief exchange was punctuated by heavy weapon discharges flickering in the distance like a gathering storm, lacerating the grey overcast of early evening, stark against the red-tinged sky. Not all the red was due to the sunset either; hab blocks were ablaze in a dozen places throughout the beleaguered city. Unfortunately the firestorms hampered our movements as much as the tau, if not more so: the xenos were able to hop about in their anti-gravitic vehicles pretty much as they wished, instead of having to grind their way along laboriously cleared routes like our Chimeras and Leman Russ were forced to do, only to end up in the middle of an ambush as like as not.

‘Tanna, sir?’ Jurgen said, producing a flask from somewhere among the tangle of webbing he was habitually festooned with, and I took it gratefully. The evenings were chill here in the equatorial mountains, where the capital had been founded, although why they hadn’t put it somewhere a little more clement was beyond me.<sup>7</sup>

‘Thank you,’ I said, sipping the fragrant beverage, and savouring the tendril of warmth which oozed its way down into my stomach. ‘Shall we go?’

‘Ready whenever you are, sir,’ my aide assured me, scrambling into the driving seat of the Salamander we’d requisitioned from the transport pool shortly after our arrival. The engine was grumbling quietly to itself already, Jurgen being far too seasoned a veteran to risk even the second or two’s delay that firing it up would take if we were caught flat-footed this close to a combat zone.

I clambered into the passenger compartment, returning the salutes of a squad of Guardsmen double-timing it past us in the direction of the main gate as I did so. With reflexes honed by decades of exposure to Jurgen’s robust driving style, I grabbed at the pintle mount for support an instant before we jerked into motion.

It was as well that I did, for in regaining my balance my eyes drifted skywards. Black shapes were moving above the buildings the fading light had now reduced to stark-edged silhouettes; etched against the crimson glow, the gracefully sinister curvature of their surfaces betraying their origin unmistakably.

‘Incoming!’ I voxed, opening fire with the storm bolter as I did so, quietly cursing my luck. The attack I’d anticipated, and come so close to avoiding, had arrived.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



*Editorial Note:*

*It will hardly come as a surprise to most of my readers that, beyond a few desultory complaints about the air temperature, Cain says little about Quadravidia itself. The following extracts may go some way towards remedying this deficiency.*

From *Interesting Places and Tedious People: A Wanderer's Waybook*, by Jerval Sekara, 145.M39.

Quadravidia will be a familiar destination for most seasoned travellers in and around the Damocles Gulf, since it has the great good fortune to be situated at the confluence of no fewer than four warp currents of unusual swiftness and stability. Unsurprisingly, therefore, this is a world, or, to be more precise, an entire planetary system, which tends to be passed through rather than visited. Indeed, it is quite possible to transfer between vessels aboard one of the many orbital docks and void stations which ring it about without ever setting foot on the planet at all.

Nevertheless, it can be worth breaking a longer journey here for a prolonged sojourn, or even making it the intended destination of an indefinite stay. Though it's true to say that at first sight the principal cities around the equator offer little to the discriminating wayfarer, consisting as they do almost entirely of starport facilities, the vulgar commercial institutions deemed necessary by those engaged in trade, and the habitations of the artisan classes apparently required in depressingly high numbers to ensure the efficient running of both, Peakhaven is as gratifyingly

cosmopolitan as any planetary capital in that region of space.

Set high in the mountain range which sprawls along the equator, bisecting the western continent, its streets and avenues cling to the sides of peak and valley alike, the highest ramparts of which wall off the worst of the noise and bustle of the starport. This is thus confined to a broad depression, some three or four kilometres across, surrounded by higher mountains. It goes without saying that lodgings should be sought on the outer wall of the rim, since the intervening mass of granite effectively muffles most of the sound of the constant shuttle traffic. The sight of it is quite spectacular, however, particularly at night, when the engine glows make a constant vortex of light in the darkness, like the sparks above a forge.

Smaller towns and villages are, of course, to be found elsewhere on the two continents, but contain little of interest.

From *The Crusade and After: A Military History of the Damocles Gulf*, by Vargo Royz, 058.M42.

Though checked by their first confrontation with the Imperium's might, the expansionist ambitions of the tau were far from blunted. The next two hundred years were marked by periodic clashes between the two powers, as frontier worlds were annexed, defended, reclaimed, and in many cases lost again. Indeed, Semplaxia was to change hands seven times in all, before ultimately being lost to both sides as the outliers of Hive Fleet Kraken smashed into the Eastern Arm, although such a case was exceptional. For the most part, what the tau gained by subterfuge or the force of arms they kept, although the Imperium made them pay a heavy price, and were even able to claim some notable successes of their own, such as the reclamation of Gravalax in 931.

Had the forces of the Emperor been able to concentrate their full might on the upstart usurpers, things would have been very different of course, but the last quarter of M41 was riven with conflict on every front. To the ever-present menace of the orks and the fell designs of the Traitor Legions was added the gradual awakening of the necrons, who began to attack human outposts in ever-increasing numbers, while the eldar continued their piractical raids seemingly at will. Perhaps fortunately the tau, too, were beginning to fall foul of these enemies and others more and more frequently as their sphere of influence expanded, preventing them from engaging in an all-out invasion of Imperial space.

The stalemate was eventually broken in 992, when a tau fleet striking deep inside the Imperial border appeared in orbit around Quadravidia, rapidly overwhelming the planetary defences, and landing an invasion force. Once in uncontested control, denying Imperial access to the vital warp currents which flowed together there, they would have effectively blockaded eight of the disputed systems in the border region, cutting them off from reinforcement, and leaving them free to be picked off at their leisure.

Fortunately for these imperilled worlds, the second relief expedition was led by Ciaphas Cain, the renowned commissar who had been so instrumental in foiling the tau designs on Gravalax, and was to prove more than equal to this fresh and more urgent threat to Imperial interests.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## TWO

Whether the warning I gave made any difference I couldn't say; but mine wasn't the only finger on a trigger as the first wave of the tau assault burst over the jagged reef of airstrike-shattered buildings surrounding the compound, and which had masked their approach from detection by our auspexes. Ragged small-arms fire sparked and popped against the smooth rounded armour of the troop carriers circling above our heads, and the bright streak of a rocket from a man-portable launcher slashed the sky for a moment before detonating against one of the blocky engine pods attached to the rear of the closest. The Devilfish lurched and pulled up, aborting its descent, but the respite was short-lived; a pair of platter-like drones detached themselves from its hull almost at once and swooped in search of vengeance, plasma rounds from the guns mounted beneath them bursting around the sandbagged emplacement from which the rocket had come.

How the Guardsmen crouched within it fared against this unexpected attack I never saw, though a flurry of las-rounds replied with commendable alacrity, for by that time my attention was entirely taken up with the matter of my own survival. The Salamander lurched, as Jurgen made a hard turn to evade a crater gouged into the rockrete ahead of us by a far bigger plasma burst from the main gun of another circling troop carrier, and I suddenly found a small, fast-moving shadow drifting across my sights.

The storm bolter bucked against its mount as I squeezed the trigger reflexively, stitching a row of impact craters along the belly of a skimmer which screamed overhead, low enough for the backwash of its passing to



snatch the cap from my head. I must have found a weak spot, for almost at once smoke began to seep from its starboard engine, and it flipped over, ploughing into the ground. It kept going on pure momentum, raising a bow wave of pulverised rockcrete, and smearing its luckless crew along the hard surface as it did so, before coming to rest embedded in the wall of the officer's mess.

'Ouch,' I said, feelingly.

'They were asking for it,' Jurgen opined, triggering the forward flamer, and immolating a couple of swooping gun drones before they had a chance to open fire on us in return. 'What sort of idiot flies around with an open cockpit in the middle of a firefight?'

'Good point,' I said, ducking behind the thick armour plate, as debris from a nearby explosion rattled against it. One of the Hydras spitting streams of tracer rounds at the descending invaders had just taken a direct hit, the intense heat of the tau plasma bolt cooking off its ammunition, and a section of hull plating whirled through the space I'd just vacated. If I hadn't ducked when I did, it would have taken my head off.

Finding my cap in the bottom of the passenger well I jammed it back on my head as firmly as possible, feeling that I might as well look the part, and peered cautiously over the rim of the armoured compartment. We were the only Imperial vehicle still moving through the blizzard of descending fire, although a Leman Russ with its track blown off was traversing its turret, scanning hopefully for a target, and the crew were bailing out of a second Hydra, which had no turret left at all that I could see. Clearly the tau had prioritised the targets most capable of harming them, although I had no doubt that they'd get round to picking off our lightly-armed Salamander before long.

'Get us under cover!' I ordered, despite being pretty sure Jurgen would have worked that out for himself by now.

'Right you are, sir,' he acknowledged, and spun the vehicle on a coin, slamming the right-hand track into reverse with a speed which elicited an alarming sound from the gearbox, although that would have been as nothing compared to the fuss any of our engineers would have made if they'd been around to hear it. Once again I clung to the pintle mount for support, while we took off in a completely different direction, plasma bolts boiling the rockcrete where we would have been if Jurgen hadn't swung us about.

The first of the attacking troop carriers hit the ground about a hundred

metres ahead, its shock absorbers flexing against the rockcrete; even before they'd fully extended again, the boarding ramp dropped. Instantly, another pair of lethal drones soared into the air to provide fire support for the pathfinder squad disembarking from it. The xenos moved with remarkable agility despite the body armour they were encased in, their faces rendered curiously insectile by the glowing red lenses embedded in their faceplates.

Undeterred, I opened fire on warriors and vehicle alike, scything a hail of bolter rounds through the air they occupied. A couple of compact plasma bolts from the ground troopers' carbines burst against the armour surrounding me in reply, gouging deep craters in the ceramite, but it held. Then a solid armour-piercing projectile slammed right through the passenger compartment, punching holes in both sides I could have pushed my fist through.

'One of them's got a rail rifle!' I shouted to Jurgan, although the noise of the engine and the firefight surrounding us meant that he could only hear me over the vox-link anyway, so there was little point in raising my voice. I tried to depress the storm bolter to engage the ground troops, but a piece of debris from the exploding Hydra was jammed in the pintle, and I couldn't swing it down far enough. 'Frak!'

'I'm on it,' Jurgan assured me, and triggered the flamer again, adding a burst from the hull-mounted heavy bolter for good measure. The pathfinder squad scattered from the gout of blazing promethium, which hosed up inside the transport through the still open passenger ramp. 'That'll give 'em something to think about.'

It certainly did: a moment later the upper hatches popped and the crew bailed out, becoming easy targets for the vengeful lasgun fire of those Guardsmen still in the fight.

At this point I began to hope that the balance might tilt the other way. The tau had a definite edge when it came to long-range shooting, but they had no stomach for getting up close and personal, while the Guard had no such qualms. In fact the death worlders making up the majority of the garrison here<sup>8</sup> seemed to prefer it, wading in with bayonet and lasrifle butt at every opportunity, their ork hide capes swirling about them with almost as much ferocious energy as if they were still attached to their original owners. Which didn't mean they fought with all the finesse and tactical sense of Khornate berserkers; quite the contrary. Where they came from, survival meant using their wits as well as their weapons.

‘All units pull back,’ General Braddick voxed, just in time to rein them in. ‘Defend the bunker.’

I couldn’t fault his tactics, our priority was clearly to deny the tau their objective, but from where I was standing (or, more accurately, rattling around like a pea in a can), we’d just handed them the initiative again.<sup>9</sup>

‘Hold on, sir,’ Jurgen urged, triggering the forward-mounted heavy bolter again. Another sleek and deadly troop carrier was drifting in from out of the darkness above our heads, cutting across our path as the pilot brought it in to land. The explosive bolts chewed away at the hull armour, doing little damage that I could see, but at the very least we must have startled the crew as the Devilfish grounded hard, buckling its landing gear; although I found myself vindictively hoping we’d done a great deal worse than that. The shock of the impact had clearly come as an unwelcome surprise to the passengers too: instead of disembarking in good order, securing the boarding ramp as they went, they boiled out as though abandoning the vehicle, and I was pleased to note that at least a couple of them were limping. The Salamander jerked violently, as Jurgen swung it round to keep the weapons bearing for as long as he could. ‘Oops.’

‘Oops indeed,’ I agreed, hanging on for dear life as my aide kept us lurching from left to right in an attempt to evade as much of the incoming fire from the xenos as he could, or possibly to run a few of the stragglers down. It was hard to be sure which, as I was more than a little preoccupied with trying to remain on my feet.

Mindful that there were probably a few Guardsmen still around too tardy or sensible to have rejoined Braddick in the middle of a closing trap, and that I had a reputation to live up to, I squeezed off a few rounds from the storm bolter too. I failed to hit any of the scattering pathfinders, the explosive projectiles simply hissing over their heads due to the damaged pintle mount, but I was pretty sure I’d put them off their aim at least.

‘Some good cover over there,’ Jurgen said, doggedly sticking to the last order I’d given him, and completely disregarding Braddick’s,<sup>10</sup> which was fine by me. Another burst from both heavy and storm bolters was enough to shred the chain fence which, in happier times, was supposed to keep lowly civilians from trespassing on the hallowed rockcrete of the Guard garrison, and with a lurch which almost broke my spine we bounced over the masonry footings and onto the road beyond. Our gallant Salamander’s tracks bit deep into the surface of the carriageway separating the perimeter

of the barracks from an abandoned industrial facility, and Jurgen rammed the throttle lever as far forward as it would go. 'That smelting plant's still standing. Mostly.'

'Keep going,' I said. Now we were clear of the combat zone I saw no reason to linger, and become a footnote in Braddick's Last Stand.

'Commissar Cain, respond,' the general's voice echoed in my comm-bead, as if in reproach to that fleeting thought. 'Are you there?'

'We're cut off from the bunker,' I told him, truthfully enough, as it would have been suicide to try fighting our way back to it though the rapidly deploying tau. 'The xenos have it completely surrounded.' Which may have been a slight exaggeration, but if it wasn't true by then it soon would be. Their preferred tactic when faced with a static defensive position was always to surround it, relying on the superior range and firepower of their weapons to wear down the defenders. The bloody business of actually taking an objective they preferred to palm off on their kroot vassals,<sup>11</sup> which I could hardly blame them for, especially as the kroot seem to enjoy that kind of thing. 'I'm going to head for the southern enclave, and try to pull some effectives together before it's too late.'

Most of the units we had left were concentrated in the southern quarter of the city, which made it the best place to be so far as I was concerned; the more bodies I could put between me and the tau the better. With a bit of luck we'd be able to hold out long enough for Zyvan's task force to turn up and evacuate the survivors, which I was determined would include me, and if the worst came to the worst it would be easy enough to go to ground on my own more or less indefinitely. I hadn't forgotten any of the lessons I'd learned dodging orks on Perlia, and the tau would be far less inclined to waste time and resources hunting down stragglers who didn't do anything stupid enough to attract their attention, like shooting at them or blowing things up, than the greenskins had been.

'Good idea,' Braddick said, clearly believing that the situation meant I'd be bringing a relieving force back with me.

'Just hold out as long as you can,' I voxed back, not having the heart to disabuse him, and sure he'd do that anyway whatever I said. 'The Emperor protects.' Although, so far as I could see, He was going to have His work cut out keeping Braddick in one piece for much longer.

Come to that, He didn't seem to be doing that good a job for me either. Shadows were moving at the end of the street, too quick and fluid to

identify, but some of them seemed uncomfortably big. All of a sudden the abandoned smeltery looked a good deal more attractive than it had done, but it was far too late to worry about that; whatever was lurking up the boulevard would have registered our approach by now, and be locking its weapons on our auspex trace as like as not.

‘Hit the lights,’ I told Jurgen, wrestling with the damaged pintle mount again, once more to no avail. Nothing was going to free the mechanism short of the benedictions of a tech-priest, and there’s never one around when you actually need one.

‘Right you are, sir,’ my aide responded, and I squinted reflexively as the powerful spotlight kindled, the beam knifing erratically through the darkness in response to every jolt of our abused suspension. Then the breath seemed to solidify in my lungs, as the dancing ray of light picked out a cluster of vaguely humaniform figures, more than twice the height of a man. Dreadnoughts, or the tau equivalent at any rate: just as heavily armed as their Imperial counterparts, and a lot more manoeuvrable.

‘Second wave’s incoming,’ I voxed to Braddick. If I was about to die, I supposed I might as well be remembered for some heroic last words. ‘I’ll delay them as long as I can.’

Which wasn’t likely to be more than a second or two, especially as I hadn’t actually said anything about trying to engage the towering battlesuits in combat. Attracting their attention just long enough for them to be sure I was heading for the horizon and not worth wasting the ammo on would be good enough for me.

‘Can you give us an estimate of their numbers and disposition?’ Braddick asked, determined to get his currency’s worth out of my noble sacrifice, and I gritted my teeth. Clearly ‘Lots, and surly,’ wasn’t going to be an acceptable answer. Throne alone knew who might be monitoring the vox-traffic, and if by some miracle I did get out of this with a whole skin, the last thing I needed was an auditory record of me appearing to panic and run for it popping up in time to prevent me enjoying the benefits of another boost to my fraudulent reputation. (Not that I’ve anything against panicking and running for it; on the contrary, it’s worked for me every time. The trick is to not let anyone else realise that’s what you’re doing, otherwise you’ll have all that tedious business of tribunals and potential firing squads to put up with afterwards.<sup>12</sup>)

‘Wait one,’ I said, hoping to buy a little time, and hoping even more

fervently that the next sound on the vox-record wasn't going to be an ominous burst of static followed by silence. I gestured to Jurgen. 'Get us off the street!'

'Very good, sir,' he responded, as phlegmatically as ever, and swung the vehicle hard over. A railgun round howled through the space we'd just vacated, the sonic boom of its passage shaking the air and making the Salamander rock on its suspension. I ducked, as he took us through the side of a warehouse without bothering to look for a door, the wall exploding around us in a shower of shattered brick as he rammed his way through it.

'Battlesuits,' I told Braddick, protecting my head from the blizzard of masonry as best I could, while Jurgen carried on demolishing interior walls in our headlong dash towards some semblance of safety. The searchlight beam had swept across the whole Crisis team just before they'd opened fire, and I tried to recall what I'd seen in as much detail as possible. Which wasn't much, if I'm honest, I'd been too busy ducking. 'A full squad, but there are probably more behind.' At least I thought I'd seen three of them, but they were hellish fast and agile, and in the dark it was hard to be sure. 'They've got railguns,' I added, as an afterthought. At least, the one which had shot at us did, and I wasn't about to go back for a look at the rest.

'Then we haven't got long,' Braddick concluded, remarkably calmly under the circumstances. We both knew the hypervelocity projectiles would punch through the reinforced ferrocrete of the bunker like Jurgen through a meringue, and with an equal amount of scattered debris.

'I think we've shaken them, sir,' Jurgen said, giving me some good news at last, ramming a large wooden cargo door as he spoke. We plummeted about a metre from a raised loading dock, not even slowing, our spinning treads slamming into the rockcreted yard in a shrapnel burst of pulverised gravel. The Salamander's floor shot up to punch me in the face, driving the breath from my lungs, and I tasted blood, where my teeth had lacerated the inside of my cheek.

'Good,' I gasped, feeling the relatively minor discomfort a small price to pay for our deliverance; but of course I was speaking too soon. Hardly had I staggered to my feet again, leaning on the much-abused pintle mount for support, than one of the towering battlesuits landed right in front of us, shaking the ground with the impact of its arrival. My elevated perch in the rear of the Salamander brought my head almost level with the pilot's,<sup>13</sup> and I flinched as a targeting beam swept across my face, blinding me for a

moment.

‘Hang on, sir!’ Jurgen called, as though I’d been doing anything else for the last ten minutes, and triggered the weapon mounts. A hail of bolter rounds and a gout of promethium roared towards the giant warrior, but the pilot triggered its jump jets at the last possible instant, and it hopped nimbly over the devastating barrage like a child with a skipping rope.

Blinking my dazzled eyes clear, I tried to track the soaring silhouette with the storm bolter, but the mounting had seized up entirely by this time; which I suppose was hardly surprising, given the battering it had taken. Then I took in the battlesuit’s trajectory with incredulous horror. ‘Jurgen!’ I yelled. ‘Jump!’

Suiting the action to the word I scrambled out of the passenger compartment and leapt for my life, praying to the Throne to grant me a soft landing. I didn’t get one, of course, the Emperor having more urgent business as usual, but Jurgen had slammed on the brakes to avoid colliding with our towering assailant, no doubt appreciating that the impact would break our necks however much damage it did to the battlesuit, so at least we were moving a lot slower than we had been. I struck the rockcrete of the yard no harder than required to crack a rib or two, which was uncomfortable enough, but I’d had worse, and felt that if I was well enough to complain about it I’d got off pretty lightly, all told.

An instant after I’d hit, the tau dreadnought landed squarely atop the Salamander, crushing it into the rockcrete with a squeal of rending metal as though it had been no more robust than a cardboard box. Rivulets of promethium gushed from the ruptured fuel and flamer tanks, spreading out around the crippled vehicle like blood from mortal wounds.

‘Jurgen!’ I called. ‘Where are you?’

‘Over here, sir.’ My aide rolled to a sitting position, half hidden in the shadow of a wall a dozen metres away, and tried to haul himself upright, one hand pressed to the side of his head. ‘I’ll be right... right with...’ Then his knees folded, and he slithered back down on his haunches. A dark stain was visible beneath his fingers, which admittedly was nothing new, but this one was spreading slowly; had it not been for his helmet, the impact of landing would probably have crushed his skull.

‘Stay down!’ I called to him, as though either of us had any choice in the matter. ‘Just got to see off this pile of unsanctified scrap, then we’ll get you to the medicae.’ And right after that, I added under my breath, the necrons

will take up flower arranging. I tapped where my comm-bead should have been, hoping to summon help, but just got an earful of finger for my pains; somewhere along the way the tiny vox-unit and I had parted company. We were on our own.

The tau battlesuit stepped back off the mashed remains of the expiring Salamander with one foot, leaving the other where it was, looking for all the world like a beast-hunter with a trophy, posing for a pict. Its head turned, scanning the yard, and I looked round frantically for some vestige of cover, only to find there wasn't one. I was surrounded by nothing but bare rockcrete, a sitting target.

I scrabbled for my sidearms, feeling better for the weight of the chainsword in my hand, even though against the heavily armoured battlesuit it would be worse than useless. Then the acrid odour of spilled promethium scratched my nostrils, and a desperate idea began to blossom, fertilised by panic. The laspistol in my other hand would barely scratch the thing's paint, but...

The looming figure raised an arm, a vicious-looking rotary cannon swinging towards me; even a single round from it would be enough to vaporise me where I stood. With no more time to think, I pulled the laspistol's trigger.

My aim was true, the las-bolt sparking off the sundered metal of the Salamander, although by this time there was so much promethium vapour in the air it hardly mattered where the round impacted. It detonated at once, a fireball boiling out from the wreck in all directions, close enough to shrivel my eyebrows. A wall of furnace heat arrived with the shockwave, slamming me back to the ground and sending my chainsword skittering off into the shadows. I hung on to the laspistol though, the augmetic fingers on my right hand slower to relinquish their grip, for which I was suitably grateful.

For a moment I dared to hope that my desperate gamble had paid off and that the battlesuit had been immolated in the explosion or, at the very least, damaged enough to discourage the pilot from pursuing us. But of course I'd reckoned without the jump jets. They kicked in at once, allowing the huge machine to ride the shockwave in a single balletic leap, with no more ill effects than a faint charring around the ankles.

I clambered to my feet once more, only to stagger again as the battlesuit crashed back to earth. This time I remained standing, however, my footing rendered no more unstable than during a typical drive with Jurgen, as the



armoured giant plodded relentlessly towards me, shaking the ground with every stride. Raising my laspistol, I sent a desperate couple of ricochets bouncing off its torso plates, but didn't even manage to slow the thing.

Then, by the light of the burning Salamander, I finally saw a way out of the trap, a second loading door further down the wall of the warehouse, this time at ground level. Without another thought I sprinted for it; but before I could get anywhere close the corrugated metal sheet bulged and tore, ripped aside by another of the towering machines as though it was no more substantial than a curtain. It too began to plod unhurriedly towards me, and I retreated a few paces, firing as I went, but for all the effect I was having I might just as well have been throwing feathers at it. After a dozen or so steps I stumbled against something yielding and almost fell, being brought up short by the stout masonry wall behind it as a familiar odour assaulted my nostrils.

'Run for it, sir. Don't mind me,' Jurgen slurred, already halfway to unconsciousness.

'Not an option,' I assured him, certain that by now escape was impossible. I raised my hands, and let the laspistol drop to the rockcrete. Perhaps they wouldn't just gun us down out of hand, if they thought we were harmless. At least we weren't dealing with vicious brutes like the orks, or refined sadists like the eldar reavers, in whose hands we'd be far better off dead anyway.

Then the targeting beam swept my face again, and I flinched, cursing, wishing I'd chosen to go down fighting after all. At least that would have left me with the illusion of possible escape right up to the end, instead of the crushing certainty of imminent ignominious butchery. I braced myself, hoping the Emperor would be in a good mood when I arrived at the Golden Throne, or at least willing to listen to excuses.

'You are commissar hero Ciaphas Cain?' a voice asked, in halting Gothic, the curious lisping accent of the tau amplified by an external vox-system somewhere on the battlesuit facing me.

'I am,' I said, fighting to keep a sudden flare of hope from inflecting my voice. If they wanted to talk, they weren't going to pull the trigger right away, although I was damned if I could see that we had anything to discuss. 'And you are?'

'Ui-Thiching, of the shas'ui ka'sui.<sup>14</sup> In the name of the Greater Good, we ask of you to convey a message to your fellows.'

Better and better. They clearly weren't about to shoot the messenger; I just had to hope Braddick didn't either.<sup>15</sup>

'What message would that be?' I asked, not wanting to seem too eager. For all I knew they were recording this and the last thing I needed was to be accused of collaborating with the enemy to save my own neck.

'We wish the negotiation of a truce,' the tau told me, as though that were the most reasonable thing in the galaxy, just as they were about to snatch the entire planet out from under us regardless.

'A truce?' I repeated, not entirely willing to trust my own ears. 'Are you sure?'

'Completely,' the amplified voice assured me. 'Hostilities must cease at once on this world. The Greater Good demands it. For both our empires.'

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



*Editorial Note:*

*One of Cain's more annoying idiosyncrasies as a chronicler of events is his tendency to gloss over periods of time in which he feels nothing of interest to have happened from his singularly self-centred perspective. Just such an elision now occurs, picking up his narrative after a gap of several weeks.*

*I have accordingly inserted the following extract, which I hope will go some way towards making up the obvious deficiency.*

From *The Crusade and After: A Military History of the Damocles Gulf*, by Vargo Royz, 058.M42.

The tau's offer of a truce was regarded with a fair degree of suspicion at first, not least by Commissar Cain, to whom it had been delivered. Nevertheless, with the Imperial forces poised on the brink of annihilation, the defenders had little option but to accept it.

Accordingly, when the relief flotilla arrived, accompanied by a hastily-assembled diplomatic mission and no less a personage than the Lord General himself, they found General Braddick in uncontested control of Peakhaven, to no one's greater surprise than his own. Before long the Quadravidia garrison had been reinforced by the new arrivals,<sup>16</sup> of sufficient strength to deter all but the most determined of assaults. But such a precaution scarcely seemed needed, as the tau remained behind the lines to which they had withdrawn immediately upon the declaration of a ceasefire.

Thus it was, with a fair degree of suspicion, that negotiations began, and

the tau's motives for such an unexpected move became clear.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## THREE

‘They’re up to something,’ I said, delighted to feel the deckplates of an Imperial vessel underfoot once again. The fact that it was Zyvan’s flagship, and therefore the most heavily armed ship in the flotilla, only added a little zest to my relief at finally making it off Quadravidia in one piece.

‘Of course they are,’ Zyvan agreed. He’d met me personally as I’d stepped off the shuttle in the hangar bay, much to my surprise; but it was pleasant to see him again, and he seemed to feel the same about me, although the purpose of my visit was far from social. ‘They’ve said nothing else since they first spoke to you?’

‘Nothing about their reasons for calling a truce,’ I said, raising my voice a little over the clatter the boots of his personal guard were making as they trotted ahead of us, clearing the corridor like a braid-bedecked dozer blade. Light from the overhead luminators ricocheted from their polished helms and hellguns, held ready for use despite the fact that we were among friends. I doubted that the captain and crew were all that happy about heavily armed Guardsmen waving guns about in their vessel, but protocol demanded it, and I for one was hardly going to complain, given the number of assassination attempts Zyvan had already survived.<sup>17</sup> ‘Just the usual bickering about the details.’ Details which Braddick and his staff had dealt with, leaving me free to seek more congenial diversions. ‘I’m afraid I can’t fill you in on those, I’m a bit behind on the paperwork.’

‘How is your man, by the way?’ Zyvan asked, as we reached the door to his personal quarters. ‘Recovering well, I trust?’

‘I’ll convey your good wishes,’ I told him. Jurgen was probably still sulking about being left behind, but the medicae had recommended light duties for a while, and being jolted around in a shuttle would hardly have helped his convalescence. Besides, I wanted him back in the bunker, so I’d know at once if Braddick did anything rash, like turning his newly-acquired firepower on the tau while their backs were turned. Throne knew, I’d be tempted in his shoes.

‘I heard what you did, going back for him like that. Not many men would,’ Zyvan said, leading the way into his state room while the storm troopers took up position outside to guard the corridor.

‘He’d have done the same for me,’ I said, truthfully enough. Evidently the tau diplomats had been talking to their Imperial counterparts already, and another spurious tale of my gallantry was doing the rounds. I settled into a comfortably padded seat, and accepted the goblet of amasec which Zyvan’s steward had already poured for me with a nod of thanks; it never hurt to get on well with the servants, particularly in my covert avocation as Amberley’s eyes and ears. I’d gleaned quite a few nuggets of information that way over the years, to my own benefit as well as hers.

‘No doubt,’ Zyvan said dryly, taking my modesty for granted, and firmly cementing the story in his mind as he did so. He accepted his own drink, and the steward bustled out, closing the door with a satisfyingly resonant thud. No chance of anything we said being overheard now. ‘I’d like you to sit in on the initial meeting.’

‘I could do that,’ I agreed, readily enough. The Commissariat would expect a report anyway, and if I didn’t agree to be their observer, one of the other commissars attached to the task force would be handed the job. I hadn’t met many, but most of the ones I’d conversed with would cheerfully urge a full-scale invasion of Quadravidia if the tau didn’t pack up and leave, a course of action which was bound to end badly. Besides, I’d had dealings with the tau and their vassals before, and couldn’t quite shake the feeling that something wasn’t right about all this; when the other boot dropped, I wanted to be there to hear it.

‘That would be most helpful,’ another voice put in, and I turned, to find a face I recognised; narrow, serious, and sporting a faint scar inflicted on a night I’d rather have forgotten.

‘Donali.’ I rose to shake hands, both surprised and pleased to see the senior diplomat I’d first met on Gravalax, the same night as Amberley,

some sixty years before. 'You're heading the delegation?'

'So it seems.' He smoothed a non-existent crease from the front of his immaculate robe, regarding me with the air of calm deliberation I recalled so clearly. 'You look well. Surprisingly so, for a man in your profession.'

'I've been lucky,' I said, with rather more sincerity than I'm used to. 'And I could say the same about you.' His hair was a lot greyer around the temples than I remembered, but then so was mine; hardly surprising, given the number of times something had tried to kill me since the last time we'd spoken.

'I'd say we've all been lucky,' Donali said. 'If you hadn't been on Quadravidia, the tau might well have decided against opening negotiations.'

'Me?' I said, in honest astonishment. 'I'm sorry, but I don't see what I've got to do with it.'

Donali settled into a seat between Zyvan and myself, and reached for the decanter the servant had left on the polished obsidian table, laid siege to by the chairs. 'The tau still remember your part in resolving the Gravalax incident,' he said.

'Do they?' I asked, an uncomfortable chill overtaking me. The stand-off there had ended in humiliation for the xenos, and if they were still carrying a grudge about it, I'd have to start looking over my shoulder.

'Indeed. They speak very highly of your integrity, and your commitment to the Greater Good of the Imperium.' Donali sipped at his drink, at just the right moment to mask any facial expression accompanying the words.

'So they had every confidence that you would relay their message, and get someone in authority to listen to it,' Zyvan added.

'Couldn't they just have voxed?' I asked, 'instead of chasing me across half the city?'

'At that point they had no idea it was you,' Donali said. 'Fortunately their vox intercepts had made them aware of your presence somewhere among the Imperial forces, and the on-board cogitator of the battlesuit you encountered had instructions to look for an officer who matched the facial features of an old pict from Gravalax.'

'I see,' I said, recalling the targeter beam sweeping across my face, and trying not to think about how close we'd come to the xenos machine-spirit having nothing recognisable left to read. 'But voxing would still have been easier.'

'I'm not sure General Braddick would have listened,' Zyvan said dryly,

and I had to concede the point. By the time I'd got back to the bunker, Braddick had concluded that the sudden cessation of the tau bombardment was the prelude to an all-out assault, and it had taken a fair amount of persuasion, not to mention shameless trading on my inflated reputation, to argue him out of sallying forth in a glorious do-or-die, pre-emptive counter-attack; which would have had precious little of the 'do' about it, given the forces ranged against him.

'So where are we supposed to be meeting them?' I asked. 'Peakhaven, or somewhere in the occupied zone?' Given the choice I'd have opted for the latter, as the tau held most of the temperate areas and I'd got heartily sick of the bracing mountain air in the capital by now. Besides, it never hurts to get a good look at your enemy's resources while they're not shooting at you. I had fewer qualms about venturing into the stronghold of the foe than I normally would, as, by and large, the tau can be trusted to observe the terms of a truce; they're devious little buggers right enough, but hoisting a white flag to lure you into a crossfire doesn't sit well with them.<sup>18</sup>

'Neither,' Donali said, to my surprise. 'The Lord General has expressed some disquiet about the opportunities for intelligence gathering afforded by a tau presence within the Imperial zone, and my opposite number from the water caste<sup>19</sup> has similar concerns.' Which, as I'd been considering precisely that myself, I could hardly quibble with.

'Where, then?' Zyvan asked, leaning forward to pour himself a refill.

'One of the abandoned orbital docks,' Donali said. 'We can secure it easily enough, and it's not as though it's needed for cargo handling at the moment.'<sup>20</sup>

'Works for me,' I said, assessing the pros and cons, and settling instantly on the major advantage from my point of view. If the whole thing went ploid-shaped and the war kicked off again, I'd be sitting comfortably above it for once.

'Me too,' Zyvan said. 'I'll ask the Navy to station a warship alongside, then we can blow the whole thing to scrap at the first sign of treachery.' An idea I liked the sound of a lot less, but Donali was already nodding in agreement.

'The tau have already indicated that they're taking a similar precaution.'

Both men looked at me, and I plastered a wry grin on my face, wondering if perhaps I should find some pressing reason to palm the job off on one of my commissarial colleagues after all but even before the thought had time



to form fully, I dismissed it. Zyvan and the tau both wanted me there, and if I pulled out, chances were the xenos would pick up their ball and go home, we'd all start shooting at each other again, and I'd get the blame for snatching defeat from the jaws of compromise. 'That should keep everyone honest,' I said instead, resolving to make sure I knew where the saviour pods were before anyone had a chance to open their mouths.

In the event I didn't need to make sure of an escape route, as everyone was on their best behaviour; although that didn't stop me from doing so anyway. By this stage in my career, finding the quickest way out of any new place I found myself in had become second nature, which rather accounted for the fact that I was still around to be paranoid.

Both warships assigned to what was euphemistically referred to as 'diplomatic protection duty' were stationed several kilometres from the orbital, due to the high concentration of debris still clustered around it. The cloud of detritus was so dense, in fact, that nothing much larger than an Aquila could approach the void station without being pounded to pieces; accordingly, as we approached the huge and somewhat battered structure, our transport bobbed and weaved like an inebriate, as the pilot was forced to make constant course corrections to avoid a collision.

'That'll take some clearing up,' Jurgen commented, peering through what seemed to me under the circumstances to be a pitifully thin sheet of armourglass at the spiralling chunks of jagged metal beyond. Many were rimed with frost, where some residual atmosphere had frozen around them, and I tried not to think too hard about the explosive decompression that had undoubtedly accompanied its deposition. Finding myself morbidly wondering how many of the motes of flotsam catching the light of the sun rising from beyond the edge of the world below were the cadavers of those too slow to have reached the closing bulkhead doors, I nodded, hoping a little conversation would distract me.<sup>21</sup>

'I imagine it will,' I agreed. I'd been in two minds about bringing him, but was grateful by now that I had. His recovery was almost complete, and if the niggling little voice in the back of my head was right and the tau were up to something underhand, there was no one I'd rather have watching my back. Besides, he'd been grumpy enough about being left behind for my little chat with Zyvan and Donali; another perceived slight would have prolonged the sulk for weeks. 'But at least it'll make it hard for anything to

sneak up on us.'

'Anything big,' Jurgen replied, after a moment's reflection. 'But it'd make it really easy to slip one of those drone things through without anyone noticing. Auspex'll be well clogged.'

'Quite so,' I said, not best pleased to have been handed something else to fret about. Offhand, I couldn't see any reason the tau would bother to do something like that, of course, but then I suppose that would have been the point. 'Can you see the void station yet?'

Jurgen shook his head. 'I thought it was on your side.'

'Your side was my side a minute ago,' I reminded him, just as the pilot tucked us into another roll, this time around a larger than usual piece of junk, which looked as though it had once been a pressure vessel from a fabricatory, or possibly a storage tank for liquids of some kind. Either way, it was longer than our Aquila, and eclipsed the sun for a moment. When the light returned it was from a new and unexpected angle, dazzling me. As I blinked my eyes clear, the orbital finally came into view.

I'd seen plenty of similar structures over the years, of course, although since our crippled starship had glanced off the anchorage above Nusquam Fundamentibus in its headlong plunge to the surface, the sight of one always brought with it a momentary surge of unease. I waited for the unwelcome sensation to pass off as it usually did, but the sense of disquiet refused to leave me, and after a while I realised it wasn't going to. Not until I had a much better idea of what was going on, anyway.

'It's a bit of a mess,' Jurgen said, unconscious as always of the irony; but on this occasion I had to concede that he had a point. The tau had attempted to board the orbital during the first wave of their initial attack, hoping to deny the SDF the chance to resupply and refit there,<sup>22</sup> but had underestimated the defenders' resolve: vastly outgunned, and faced with certain annihilation, the captain of the last surviving gunboat rammed the primary docking arm, reducing both it and his vessel to high-velocity shrapnel and taking a respectable tally of tau Mantas with him.<sup>23</sup> The resulting mess had forced both sides to abandon the structure, although I gathered that the tau had been making diligent efforts to repair it prior to their unexpected offer of a ceasefire.

As our shuttle drifted closer, the full magnitude of the damage the void station had suffered became progressively clearer. What had appeared from a distance to be nothing more than minor blemishes on the hull gradually

grew, revealing themselves to be vast chasms torn or burned through the sheathing metal, or blown out by internal detonations. Through these jagged rents the equally ragged edges of interior decks could be seen, the damage going deeper than our running lights would penetrate.

Uncountable firefly sparks moving in and around these stricken areas puzzled me for a moment, until, as we approached the small lighted region on one edge of the city-sized structure where warmth and air awaited us, one drifted close enough for me to recognise it. It was a smooth-sided drone, of the kind I'd become all too familiar with on the battlefield, although this particular specimen was equipped with a welding torch instead of armament; it floated past the viewport, followed a moment later by a couple more, carrying girders and flat sheets of construction material in articulated manipulator arms.

'That must be where we're going,' I concluded a few moments later, spotting a bay door cranking open to admit our approaching Aquila. The habitable zone stood out clearly now, enough to discern a few details even from this distance: the warm, golden lights blazing from viewports and docking bays standing in stark and poignant contrast to the dark, dead bulk of the station to which it clung. Welcoming as it looked, I still felt a shiver of apprehension. Smooth, curving, tau-constructed surfaces clung to the solid Imperial structure beneath like fungus to a decaying tree trunk, where the xenos had repaired and replaced the original architecture, tainting it with their inhuman presence. Clearly they'd intended to stay, claiming the entire orbital for their own, before whatever it was they were concerned about had prompted them to sue for peace on the very threshold of victory.

There was little time for such dispiriting reflection, however, as before long we were on our final approach, the great portal looming up to swallow our tiny shuttle. The hangar beyond was absurdly large for so modest a vessel, it having been intended for heavy lift shuttles capable of lugging a Titan around,<sup>24</sup> and able to accommodate several at once to boot, so the Aquila seemed dwarfed by the cavernous space surrounding us. A few moments later the hull reverberated to the clang of our landing gear making contact with the deck, and the whine of our engines died away.

So great a volume took several minutes to pressurise, and I spent the time gazing at our surroundings as best I could through the haze of frost which formed instantly across the viewport as the thickening atmosphere met a hull chilled to near absolute zero by the vacuum of space. The tau

renovations didn't seem to have spread as far as the interior of this particular hangar, and I took heart from the familiar sturdy girderwork surrounding us, the oppressive sense of wrongness I'd felt at all those smooth curves clinging to the surface of the station receding a little. There was even an Imperial aquila dominating the far wall, its spreading wings poised to enfold the vast chamber in the protection of the Emperor.

About a dozen other shuttles stood in serried ranks nearby, the Imperial ones close to our own, while the unmistakable rounded hulls of their tau counterparts were stationed on the opposite side, ironically appearing to receive the benediction of the Imperial icon behind them. Through the gradually melting rime obscuring the viewport I could see movement, which at first I ascribed to vacuum-hardened servitors tending the air pumps, or perhaps simply wandering vaguely in search of the cargoes they used to lug about. But as the temperature rose and the armourglass cleared, their true nature became apparent. Void-suited Guardsmen, their heraldry and the hellguns they carried marking them out as members of Zyvan's retinue.

'The Lord General must be here already,' I remarked, confirming my guess almost at once as I caught sight of his personal shuttle, half-hidden behind an adjacent Arvus, and Jurgen nodded.

'And he don't trust the xenos any more than we do,' he added, with every sign of approval.

'I think that's mutual,' I said, catching a glimpse of similar movement among the xenos shuttles across the wide expanse of clear decking between us. 'They've posted guards too.' The armoured figures seemed unusually squat for tau, and a moment of further observation revealed the reason. 'Demiurg, by the look of them.' Which finally confirmed the long-standing rumour of a contingent of the blocky xenos accompanying the tau fleet.

'Doesn't matter who they are,' Jurgen said, reducing the political complexities to their most basic as readily as he usually did. 'If they get in the way they're kroot fodder.'

'Quite so,' I said, hoping it would turn out to be that easy. Then the hiss of the pressure seal breaking informed me that the atmosphere was now dense enough to breathe, and that it was time to disembark. I adjusted the angle of my cap to one I hoped my reception party would consider appropriately heroic, and began to descend the ramp.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## FOUR

Outside the confines of the shuttle, the hangar seemed bigger than ever, a bleak metal plain stretching into the distance for roughly a kilometre,<sup>25</sup> unrelieved by anything other than the occasional protruding fuel line or deactivated loader. The residual chill, which had seeped in along with the vacuum accompanying our arrival, hardly made the place seem any more welcoming, although Jurgen seemed happy enough with being able to see every breath we exhaled.

After exchanging salutes and a few words with the Guardsmen we'd observed through the Aquila's viewport, my aide and I began to trudge towards the hatchway they'd indicated, leaving them and their opposite numbers to glower at one another across the echoing void.

Even though I knew there was little risk of active hostilities breaking out before we reached it, the veteran storm troopers assigned to Zyvan's personal guard being far too disciplined to start anything, I must confess to feeling a distinct sense of relief as we approached the airlock set into the wall ahead of us.<sup>26</sup> The demiurg could be touchy, especially if the tau weren't around to keep an eye on them, and standing around in the open made me feel dangerously exposed even at the best of times.

The temperature rose to more comfortable levels almost as soon as the hangarside door thudded closed behind us, which improved my mood no end, although my renewed equanimity lasted no longer than the time it took for the further door to open. Instead of the solid metal bulkheads I'd been expecting, the walls of the corridor beyond were of smooth, blue-white

polymer, reflecting the pale refulgence of tau luminators. Clearly this part of the station was firmly in enemy hands.

‘Commissar Cain?’ A young woman in a pale-grey kirtle was waiting for me, an elaborately braided scalplock reaching halfway down her back. If anything, her appearance was even more disconcerting than the decor. ‘The other delegates are waiting for you in the conference suite.’ Her Gothic was flawless, though marred by the peculiar lisp with which the tau inflected it.

‘Then I must apologise for my tardiness,’ I replied, masking my discomfiture with the greatest of ease. If nothing else, I’ve had plenty of practice of doing that over the years. In truth, though, I was profoundly shaken. I’d known intellectually, of course, that the tau had annexed a number of human worlds in the last couple of centuries, and that their inhabitants had embraced the insidious creed of the so-called Greater Good, but I’d never thought to meet one of the heretics in the flesh, unless it was at the business end of a chainsword.

‘No apology is required,’ the woman said, with a courteous inclination of her head. She was damn good at her job, I had to give her that. She hadn’t even blinked at her first sight of Jurgen.<sup>27</sup> ‘Please follow me.’

‘With pleasure,’ I assured her, with rather more gallantry than accuracy, as I fell into step at her elbow. Were the tau hoping to put us at our ease by her presence, or was it supposed to rattle us, leaving us more inclined to make an error? Either way, I was damned if I’d give them the satisfaction of reacting in any way other than the appearance of perfect calm. ‘May I present my aide, Gunner Jurgen?’

‘Of course.’ She nodded at him, as though I’d just introduced an item of furniture. ‘Pleased to make your acquaintance.’

‘And you are?’ I asked, convinced now that she was as practised a dissembler as I was.

‘Au’lys Devrae, Facilitator of External Relations.’

‘Tau personal name, Imperial family one,’ I said. ‘Interesting combination.’

‘Quite common where I come from,’ she assured me, with a smile most men would have taken for genuine. ‘A blend of both, to remind us of the Greater Good.’

‘And where would that be?’ I asked, trying not to sound as though I meant to earmark it for virus bombing. Clearly her home world was well past due for liberating, although whether a population where heresy had taken such

firm root could ever be guided back to the light of the Emperor seemed a moot point to me.

‘Ka’ley’ath,’ she said, before apprehending the name meant nothing to me. ‘Our ancestors called it Downholm,’<sup>28</sup> she added helpfully.

‘Still doesn’t ring any bells,’ I admitted. While we’d been talking, we’d progressed deep into the heart of the station, finding the same patchwork of tau and Imperial systems wherever we went, which I suppose applied to Au’lys too.

‘It’s a big empire,’ she said, failing to take offence, and provoking the first genuine smile from me; but I suppose most of its denizens must have been ignorant of just how small and insignificant the tau holdings were compared to the scale of the Imperium, or they would never have dared to challenge us in the first place.<sup>29</sup> ‘Just through here.’ She gestured to a doorway, no different to my eyes than any of the others we’d passed, apart from some inscription in the blocky, rounded sigils of the tau alphabet.

‘You’re not joining us for the briefing?’ I asked, and the woman shook her head.

‘I’m no warrior,’ she told me, with a hint of amusement. ‘I happened to be on my way up here, so I offered to escort you.’

‘For the Greater Good,’ I said dryly, but she only nodded, either missing the sarcasm or choosing to ignore it.

‘In a small way,’ she agreed. ‘But I was also curious to meet some of our kindred from beyond the empire. There are stories, of course, but you never really know how true they are.’

‘Then I hope we lived up to your expectations,’ I said, doing my best to hide my amusement.

‘You certainly did,’ she assured me, although for some reason she seemed to be looking at Jurgen as she spoke, then she ambled away down the corridor without so much as a backward glance.

‘Heretic,’ Jurgen muttered, the minute she was out of earshot, fingering the butt of his lasgun as though tempted to use it.

‘Quite,’ I agreed, envying him his uncomplicated response to things. The encounter had disconcerted me more than a little, and I still couldn’t shake the conviction that that had been precisely the point. I took a deep breath, adjusting my face, and approached the door Au’lys had indicated. ‘Come on. Let’s find out what all this is about.’



Au'lys had called the room a conference suite, but it was like none I'd ever been in before. There were aspects of it I recognised, of course, like the softly glowing hololith display suspended in the air, but the image inside it was crystal sharp, instead of wavering like the ones I was used to, and the edges formed a perfect sphere, instead of hazing away in a diffuse blob. It took me a moment to pick out the projection unit from among the other mechanica ranged about the room, as there was no sign of the tangle of power cables and optical links I would have expected, nor of any tech-priests ministering to it. The hololiths I was used to needed constant adjustment, anointing, and the occasional devotional kick to remain focused. It also didn't help that everything looked the same: flat, glossy surfaces mounted at an angle in rounded lecterns, with glowing runes appearing and disappearing on them pretty much at random.

The biggest surprise was the absence of a table, which would have formed the focal point of any Imperial conference chamber. Instead, it seemed, we were expected to perch on round, padded seats, which were scattered around the carpet like fungus erupting from a lawn. About a dozen of these were occupied, by roughly equal numbers of humans and tau, with about half as many again left vacant. All the humans I could see, sitting or standing around the periphery, wore Imperial garb, so I assumed any other turncoats among the xenos contingent were being kept tactfully out of sight.

Leaving Jurgen to join Zyvan's bodyguard, and investigate the refreshment table on my behalf, I claimed a seat between Donali and the Lord General, who smiled at my attempt to perch on the blasted thing without slithering off.

'They're comfortable enough, once you get used to them,' Zyvan assured me, before wobbling a bit himself, and glancing sardonically at Donali. 'So I'm told.'

The diplomat, of course, looked perfectly at ease, but since he'd spent half his life liaising with the tau, he'd had plenty of time to get used to their peculiar taste in furnishings. He inclined his head in greeting. 'Commissar. We were beginning to think you'd got lost.'

'I had an excellent guide,' I assured him. 'Au'lys Devrae. I take it you've met?'

'Our paths have crossed,' Donali said blandly.

'And you never thought to mention there were human traitors among the invasion fleet?' I asked, perhaps a little more bluntly than was polite. This

was evidently news to Zyvan, as his eyebrows rose quizzically, and he gazed at the diplomat in a fashion most men would have found intimidating to say the least.

‘She isn’t attached to the fleet,’ Donali explained. ‘I gather there are humans under arms among the empire’s forces, just as there are vespid, kroot, and others, but they wouldn’t be deployed against the Imperium.<sup>30</sup> They fear the resulting bad feeling would impede efforts to find a diplomatic solution here.’

‘To say the least,’ I agreed. The abhorrence most Guardsmen felt for traitors and heretics would make it almost impossible to rein them in.

‘But there are humans here?’ Zyvan persisted.

Donali nodded. ‘They call themselves Facilitators. Not an exact translation of the tau phrase *ku’ten vos’kla*,<sup>31</sup> but close enough. They move in after a world’s been annexed, helping what’s left of the local authorities to rebuild the infrastructure, and nudging everything towards promoting the idea of the Greater Good.’

‘So if Devrae’s already here, the tau must have thought Quadravidia was in the bag,’ I concluded.

‘Wrapped up, and ready to hand to the ethereals,’ Donali confirmed.

‘Which rather begs the question of why they changed their minds,’ Zyvan said.

‘Looks like we’re about to find out,’ I said, as a flurry of activity near the door caught my attention. A tau in an ornately decorated robe, its intricate intertwinings of multicoloured thread no doubt an indication of his status for those able to decode them, was just entering the room, surrounded by a retinue of lackeys thick enough to obscure most of him from view. Many of them clutched thin, flat devices I assumed to be data-slates, and all glanced in our direction with varying degrees of curiosity, apprehension, and disdain. None of them had anything which looked like a weapon, but I knew better than to take that at face value. ‘Our host has arrived.’

Donali nodded. ‘Someone senior from the water caste. Not sure who, but a fast courier boat arrived in-system last night. I’m told they’ve brought the latest information with them.’

‘But not, I presume, what that information is,’ Zyvan said sourly.

Donali shook his head. ‘The water caste like to keep the cards in their hands hidden for as long as they can,’ he said.

I turned, leaning as far as I dared on my precarious seat, trying to get a

better view of the half-hidden diplomat, but just as his face was about to emerge from the scrum the familiar figure and odour of Jurgen loomed up in front of me, blotting out what little I could see of the approaching delegation. 'They've got tanna,<sup>32</sup> sir,' he said, in pleased surprise, handing me a delicately worked tea bowl brimming with the fragrant infusion. For want of anything better to do, I took it and sipped, savouring the delicate flavour<sup>33</sup> of the drink.

'I remembered your fondness for that particular beverage,' a tau voice told me, and I rose to my feet, extending a hand in greeting. If I'm honest, I hadn't recognised the sound of it, all tau vocal cords mangling Gothic in pretty much the same way to my ears, but I never forget a face that's nearly got me killed.

'El'hassai,' I said, the sixty years since I'd last seen the tau diplomat falling away like so many days the moment I got a clear sight of him. No doubt one of his own kind would have detected signs of aging, Throne knows I'd acquired more than my own share, but he looked pretty much the same to me. 'I'm pleased to see you so well.'

'And I you,' El'hassai responded politely, shaking the proffered hand just gingerly enough to let me know he hadn't forgotten the augmetic fingers lurking beneath my glove, before turning to Donali. 'Erasmus. It's been far too long a time.'

'It has indeed,' Donali said levelly, although I'd wager he was as surprised as I was to be greeted by our old sparring partner from Gravalax.

'Lord General,' El'hassai went on, not missing a beat. 'A great pleasure to meet you at last.'

'No doubt.' Zyvan inclined his head courteously, his impatience manifest. 'I look forward to hearing what you have to say.' Like me, he'd spent many years cultivating a bluff, no-nonsense public face, which robbed his bluntness of any implied offence; or at least it would have to any Imperial citizen familiar with his reputation. No point in leaving anything to chance, so I stuck my oar in too, diverting the tau's attention as quickly as possible, in case that aspect of the Lord General's personality had somehow been omitted from the briefing slate.<sup>34</sup>

'I must confess, I'm curious too,' I said, sipping the tanna again, with a fine show of appreciation for our host's thoughtfulness. 'Especially since you roped me in as your messenger boy.'

'Hardly that,' El'hassai assured me, although I wasn't fluent enough in tau

body language to tell if I was being patronised or not. From what I remembered of him, his good opinion of me was genuine enough (I'd saved his life, so it damn well ought to have been), though, so I gave him the benefit of the doubt. 'But your presence was a fortuitous coincidence we were happy to take advantage of.'

'Any time,' I assured him blandly, adding 'but I still think they could just have picked up the bloody vox,' *sotto voce* to Zyvan and Donali as the tau diplomat wandered away towards the hololith. Neither had time to reply, although Donali made an interesting choking noise in the depths of his goblet.

'Thank you for your attendance,' El'hassai said, turning to face the room, his voice cutting easily across it. The murmur of conversation died away to an expectant silence, broken only by the faint humming of the recirculators, and the rather less faint sound of Jurgen's jaws making short shrift of the finger food on the side table. 'No doubt our offer of a truce has been the cause of a fair amount of speculation,' at which point he glanced in the direction of the Imperial contingent in a manner which, in a human, I could only describe as arched, 'but I'm sure you'll agree our reasons for it are sound.'

'I might, if you ever got round to telling us what they were,' Zyvan muttered. Then his expression changed, as an image appeared in the hololith. 'Emperor almighty!'

'And all His saints,' I added, feelingly. The image was crystal clear, almost as though the horror it depicted was present in the room with us, although if it had been the chamber would have needed to be bigger than the entire orbital. Leprous hide thicker than the armour of a battleship, pocked with ineffectual weapons fire, loomed up at us out of the depths of space, spinning below our vantage point like a biological moon. Beyond the horizon of chitin, other massive creatures of the same monstrous ilk swam through the void, surrounded by clouds of lesser organisms too numerous to count.

'A tyranid fleet,' Zyvan said, raising his voice to address the room, although the sudden eruption of gasps, murmurs, and muttered prayers to the Emperor among the Imperial delegation made it abundantly clear that we'd all recognised it for what it was. He indicated the larger bio-ships. 'Kraken and escorts.'

'Mostly,' El'hassai said, in remarkably even tones. 'The large one in the

foreground would appear to be a leviathan, although the image we have of it is only partial.'

I stared at it, trying to take in the full scale of the horror before me, like a mountain made flesh. Or, given its environment, an asteroid might be a more apposite comparison. My mind flashed back to the burning, dying thing I'd glimpsed in the midst of the eruption on Nusquam Fundamentibus, where we'd been forced to sacrifice an entire city to kill a crippled cousin of this monstrous thing; that had seemed huge enough, and I'd seen only a fraction of its mass.

'Where did this come from?' I asked, realising as soon as I'd spoken just how many ways so imprecise a question could be misinterpreted, but El'hassai seemed to grasp my meaning well enough.

'This is the last transmission from an exploration vessel, lost in the Coreward Marches<sup>35</sup> a little less than two cyr ago.'

'About eighteen months,' Donali murmured, for the benefit of those of us unfamiliar with the tau calendar. 'Twenty at the most.'

'And you've only just got it?' I asked, trying not to sound too sceptical.

El'hassai nodded, a gesture he seemed to have picked up from his prolonged contact with humans;<sup>36</sup> I remembered him doing the same thing on Gravalax. 'The vessel launched a courier drone<sup>37</sup> shortly before it was destroyed,' he said. 'The images you're seeing now were uploaded to it in real time.'

I watched with horrified fascination as innumerable tiny pustules swelled up on the body of the bloated horror beneath us, then burst, spewing clouds of spinning organisms into the void. Thousands upon thousands of them, their hardened carapaces protecting them from the cold and vacuum of space, fangs and talons and bioweapons poised for massacre. I'd faced innumerable horrors spawned from the tyranid hive fleets myself, but never anything so hideous as these: half warrior, half boarding pod, all implacable killing machine. Some were carrying creatures I recognised – genestealers, termagants and raveners for the most part, encysted behind semi-transparent membranes – while others seemed to be more than sufficiently lethal on their own accounts.

'Why don't they just fire the main engines?' I asked; if I'd been the tau captain I'd be halfway to the Ghoul Stars by now.

'According to the telemetry recovered, the engines were at full power by this point,' El'hassai said soberly. 'We conjecture that the vessel had been

immobilised in some fashion; the stresses on the hull would be consistent with constricting tentacles or gripping claws.'

Zyvan nodded. 'Seen that a few times,' he agreed. 'They ram a ship, latch on, and send in the killers.'

The onrushing swarm was filling the hololith by now, each detail more ghastly than the last, and I must confess to a feeling of relief as the image finally disappeared in a burst of static.

'At this point,' El'hassai said evenly, 'we believe the main reactor overloaded, although there is no way to tell if this was deliberate, or how much damage the explosion inflicted on the leviathan. We may hope that it was sufficient to kill or cripple the hive ship, but in any event, many of the swarm will have survived.'

'And become aware of the presence of prey,' Zyvan said.

'Precisely,' El'hassai agreed. He did something to the projection controls and a fresh image appeared, a star map studded with familiar constellations. Little icons popped up, marking Imperial, tau, and unclaimed worlds; although it went without saying that their idea of these categories didn't entirely coincide with ours. This was hardly the time to reopen old quarrels, though, so I refrained from saying anything, although I was pretty sure I could hear Zyvan's teeth grinding. 'The message drone was recovered here,' a fresh icon appeared well within the borders of the Tau Empire, 'last kai'rotaa—'

'About two months back,' Donali murmured quietly.

El'hassai continued speaking, as if unaware of the comment. '—and our preliminary analysis of its data places the encounter with the tyranid fleet somewhere around here,' he concluded.

Another icon appeared, and Zyvan shook his head in perplexity. 'That can't be right,' he said. 'The main tyranid incursions are coming in from the Rim.'<sup>38</sup>

'They have done until now,' I said, my eye falling on the marker pinpointing Nusquam Fundamentibus. The dormant brood we'd discovered there had to have come from somewhere, and the fleet the tau had blundered into certainly seemed close enough to have sent out a scouting party several millennia ago. 'But it wouldn't be the first time an isolated splinter fleet popped up without warning.'

'Our experience also,' El'hassai agreed. 'In view of the evident risk, we sent scout vessels to backtrack the message drone, and found that the

tyranids have indeed altered their course.’ A line began to extend from the point where the luckless explorer crew had first encountered the hive fleet, towards the position of the drone’s recovery.

‘They followed it,’ I said heavily, the coin dropping. Which was hardly surprising; the tau had done pretty much everything they could to attract the ’nids short of handing them a menu and a map.

‘They did,’ El’hassai confirmed. Another icon flared. ‘The scout fleet encountered them here, and engaged a few of the outlying bio-ships before being forced to withdraw. If they continue to advance at the rate they have been, they’ll be into the border region in a matter of weeks.’<sup>39</sup> The line extended itself, cutting back and forth across the wavering one between the two powers.

‘That puts over a dozen inhabited worlds at risk,’ Zyvan said, in the tone of a man determined to get all the bad news out of the way in one go. ‘If the fleet absorbs that much biomass, it’ll become unstoppable.’

‘Which is why we propose putting aside our present dispute,’ El’hassai said, nodding gravely. ‘The Greater Good demands it.’

Zyvan was nodding too, still trying to absorb the implications. ‘I believe it does,’ he agreed.



## FIVE

After a bombshell like that, there wasn't much to do except return to Zyvan's flagship and work out our strategy, while the tau went into a huddle of their own to do the same. Although, as they'd already had a couple of months to think about it, I was sure they'd have most of their preparations well in hand by now.

'We can't just abandon Quadravidia,' General Braddick urged, leaning his weight on the arms of one of the reassuringly solid chairs around the main data display. He was evidently sufficiently unimpressed with the opulence of Zyvan's private quarters, and the presence of the most senior Guard officer in the Eastern Arm himself, to be inhibited from speaking his mind. We'd convened in the operations room of the Imperial flagship, a space apparently converted from a cargo bay or munitions store,<sup>40</sup> judging by the amount of hastily-welded ducting and jury-rigged cables cluttering up the place. Just like home, in fact, to an old campaigner like me, who trusted utility over aesthetics, particularly where warfare was concerned. The corridors leading to it had been carpeted and paintings and holoprints strategically placed over the most unsightly blemishes in the paintwork, as befitted its occupation by someone of Zyvan's exalted status, but he liked his workspace to be as uncluttered and free of distraction as possible.

'We won't,' the Lord General assured him, appreciating plain speaking as he always did. 'But you'll have to hold on here with no more than a token garrison.'

Braddick smiled, mirthlessly. 'No change there, then.'



‘Except that the tau will be pulling out too,’ I reminded him. The hololith in front of us was wavering in the reassuring manner I was used to, and I nodded my thanks as an engineeer muttered a benediction and thumped an already dented panel with a mechadendrite, bringing the starfield back into focus. ‘They’re transferring their assets to reinforce the defences of three of their systems along the edge of the Gulf.’ As I gestured, they obligingly flared a rather bilious shade of green.

‘The three closest to the projected line of the tyrannid advance.’ Braddick nodded, to show he was keeping up, although he had no need to demonstrate his tactical acumen; his record was more than sufficient to do that. ‘Are they leaving a token garrison here too?’

‘They say not,’ I told him. ‘They consider the risk of a misunderstanding escalating into a resumption of hostilities to be too great.’

‘So they’re just going to pack up and leave,’ Braddick said, not bothering to hide his scepticism. ‘After all the effort they’ve made to take the place?’

‘The tau are nothing if not pragmatists,’ Zyvan said. ‘There’s no point in them expending any more resources to hang on here, if doing so costs them three other worlds lost to the ’nids.’

‘Who would then be strong enough to devour Quadravidia whoever holds on to it,’ I pointed out. Braddick nodded again, clearly liking that idea no more than we did.

‘Envoy El’hassai has assured us that their troops will complete the withdrawal long before we’re ready to vacate the system,’ Zyvan said. In fact they’d already begun to leave, with about half the strength of the besieging army on its way to defend the vulnerable outposts along the border by now. ‘Another three days should see Quadravidia firmly back in Imperial hands.’

‘Thank the Throne,’ Braddick said feelingly, for which I could hardly blame him. A couple of weeks ago he’d been staring defeat in the face, and this unexpected deliverance certainly had a whiff of divine intervention about it; even for a die-hard cynic like me.

‘One thing you might care to keep an eye on,’ I said, keeping my voice as neutral as I could; but Braddick was no fool, and fixed a steely eye on me at once.

‘What haven’t I been told?’ he asked, with an understandable touch of asperity.

‘The tau have made an offer of reparations, which His Excellency the

governor is minded to accept,' I said, in my most diplomatic tone.

'Because His Excellency the governor is a self-obsessed, inbred imbecile, who can't see the trap for the honey,' Zyvan added, not diplomatically at all.

'What sort of reparations?' Braddick asked, in tones which told me all too clearly that he shared the Lord General's opinion of the Emperor's anointed representative on Quadravidia.

'Assistance with the reconstruction effort,' I told him. 'Resources, expertise and civilian advisors to coordinate everything with the Administratum and the Adeptus Mechanicus.'

'Preaching subversion and heresy the whole time, no doubt,' Braddick snorted.

'No doubt,' I agreed, 'and I'd keep a particularly close eye on a bunch of human renegades calling themselves "Facilitators" if I were you.'

'You can count on it,' he assured me, before turning back to the hololith. 'What's the wider strategy?'

'The only one that makes sense,' Zyvan said. A world on the Imperial side of the border flared crimson, indicating the presence of an Adeptus Mechanicus holding.<sup>41</sup> 'Fecundia provides half the arms and ammunition in the sector.'<sup>42</sup>

'If we lose it, we're frakked,' I agreed, contemplating the display. 'And it's the nearest Imperial world to the tyrannids' line of advance.'

'Assuming the tau have extrapolated their course correctly,' Zyvan said, a note of caution entering his voice. Neither of us could see what the xenos would have to gain by feeding us false information, but that didn't mean they weren't being selective about what they passed on. Throne knew, I would be if I were in their shoes. He manipulated the controls, kicked the lectern, and the line of the hive fleet's projected course extended.

I nodded, in grim satisfaction, as it almost clipped one of the tau worlds highlighted in green. 'If they bypass Fecundia, then the tau will be next on the menu,' I said. 'Meaning we can fall back to the Sabine Cluster while they bear the brunt of the onslaught. That should give us more than enough time to dig in, in case any splinter fleets or stragglers drift coreward across the border.'

'Why not do that straight away?' Braddick asked, no doubt noticing that we'd be far closer to Quadravidia if we did. 'Let the Mechanicus defend the forge world themselves.'

‘If they had anything there capable of it, we would,’ Zyvan said. ‘But they’d be overwhelmed in a matter of days by a fleet that size.’

‘These are their assets,’ I said, bringing up a fresh data display. ‘One company of skitarii and that’s about it. No Titans, no militia. Why would they waste resources on their own defence when they know the Guard need them so much they’ll step in at the first sign of a threat?’

‘How very efficient of them,’ Braddick said sourly.

‘Indeed,’ I said. In truth, I felt a certain sneaking regard for the cogboys, who’d been astute enough to realise that the steady stream of Imperial Guard units putting in to resupply there already gave them all the protection they needed; at least under normal circumstances. Unfortunately, these were anything but.

‘We can’t take the risk of leaving them to fend for themselves,’ Zyvan said firmly, and that was that; just one sentence, and we were committed.

All in all, I supposed, it could have been worse; at least no one was suggesting we went charging off to engage the hive fleet head on. With any luck it would bypass the forge world entirely, leaving the tau to blunt their advance while we sat on the sidelines, poised to render them all possible assistance short of actually doing anything, leaving us ready to mop up the survivors of both sides; we might even be able to annex a couple of their worlds for a change into the bargain (which would serve them right for trying to grab Quadravidia, if you asked me).

That was the theory, anyway, but of course it didn’t work out like that.

Despite my forebodings, the tau completed their withdrawal on schedule, leaving only a handful of so-called merchantmen orbiting the war-ravaged world. El’hassai, of course, insisted that they were only there to deliver humanitarian cargoes to help with the relief effort, and that their formidable armaments had been deactivated. For all I knew, he was right; the locals could certainly do with all the relief they could get. Of course, it was going to come with a heavy price tag if I was any judge; but nobody asked me, least of all the governor. On the mercifully few occasions I couldn’t avoid talking to the puffed-up popinjay he seemed absurdly pleased with himself, apparently believing the whole thing to have been his idea all along, so I just kept my own counsel, and made sure I included a verbatim record of his most asinine remarks in my next dispatch to Amberley. We were due to leave orbit within days, and, after that, whatever happened to Quadravidia

was going to be someone else's problem in any case.

Being mainly concerned by now with the upcoming defence of Fecundia, I was more than a little surprised when I wandered into Zyvan's command centre a few hours before our scheduled departure to find El'hassai already ensconced there, deep in earnest conversation with the Lord General.

'Commissar.' The tau diplomat glanced in my direction, smiling a welcome; although, as with so many other apparently human expressions, I wasn't entirely sure how much of that was genuine, and how much it was studied to put me at my ease. So I plastered an equally welcoming expression on my own face, and extended a courteous hand.

'Envoy. An unexpected pleasure,' I said. I glanced at Zyvan, whose face was a carefully studied mask of neutrality behind his immaculately trimmed beard. 'To what do we owe this visit?'

'The envoy has a proposal to make,' Zyvan told me, in his most non-committal tone, 'which he hopes will foster trust between us in the face of our mutual enemy.' Which sounded to me like a direct quotation.

El'hassai nodded his agreement. 'Indeed so,' he declaimed, glancing towards the Lord General, then back to me. 'An exchange of observers. To facilitate communication between the tau and the Imperial elements of our alliance.'

'In other words, some of our people tag along to...' Zyvan gestured to the green blob most likely to end up on the hive fleet's snack trolley, and hesitated. 'Dreth... thingy.'

'Dr'th'nyr,' El'hassai supplied helpfully, untroubled by the world's typical lack of vowels.

'Exactly,' Zyvan agreed, 'to report back on the tau deployment, and pass on any useful intelligence they can gather about the 'nids.' Not just the 'nids either, of course, but we all knew what was remaining unsaid, and no one was tactless enough to verbalise it.

'Pass it on how?' I asked. 'The tau don't have astropaths, do they?'<sup>43</sup>

'We do not,' El'hassai confirmed, 'although we are entirely agreeable to the Imperial delegation including one.'

'That could be arranged,' Zyvan agreed. 'It'd keep the two fleets coordinated more effectively than sending dispatches by courier boat.' Until the astropathic connection was severed by the shadow in the warp cast by the approaching tyrannids, anyway. This in itself would be sufficient to let the other group know the attack had fallen elsewhere.

‘And who did you have in mind to lead this delegation?’ I asked, already perfectly aware of the answer to that, and determined to head it off. None of the forge worlds I’d seen before had been particularly inviting, but there was a fair chance that the ’nids would bypass Fecundia entirely, whereas joining the tau in the defence of Dr’t’h’nyr seemed tantamount to charging straight down the gullet of the nearest hive ship to me.

‘Precisely the question we were debating,’ El’hassai said smoothly. ‘You have the confidence of both powers, and extensive experience of campaigning against the tyranids.’

Which, needless to say, I was hardly keen to extend any further. It wouldn’t exactly be politic to say so, though, so I nodded thoughtfully, as if I was actually considering the implied proposal.

‘I do indeed,’ I said evenly. ‘Although that may not be the most essential quality where this job’s concerned.’

‘Really?’ Zyvan asked, raising an eyebrow. ‘What do you think would be?’

‘Familiarity with the tau way of doing things,’ I replied promptly. ‘If the tyranid attack is directed at Dr’t’h’nyr,’ and I have to say I made a pretty good fist of the pronunciation all things considered, to no one’s surprise greater than my own, ‘it’ll be vital to know precisely what’s going on. One moment’s hesitation or misunderstanding in the heat of battle could lead to catastrophe.’ I shrugged, in my most artless, self-deprecating fashion. ‘And, with the best will in the galaxy, I’m hardly *au fait* with the complexities of tau protocol.’

‘Who would you suggest, then?’ El’hassai asked and I put on my most decisive face.

‘Donali, of course,’ I said. ‘He’s spent so much time with the water caste he’ll know exactly what to do in any situation without needing to be briefed. Leaving everyone free to prosecute the war with the greatest efficiency.’

‘There’s much merit in your analysis,’ El’hassai said, after a moment, to my carefully concealed surprise, and even greater relief. ‘You have a fine grasp of the principle of the Greater Good.’

‘I just think it makes more sense to send a diplomat to do a diplomat’s job,’ I said, hardly able to believe I’d been able to palm the job off on someone else quite so easily, ‘while I get on with the soldiering.’

Zyvan nodded in agreement. ‘I’d rather have you with the fleet anyway,’

he admitted, which promptly triggered a fresh flare of unease I hadn't bargained for, as I tried to work out what he knew that I didn't. 'We'll have to thrash things out with the cogboys, and you know what they're like.'

'They can be a bit difficult to work with,' I agreed. But at least they were human, more or less, and I'd find it a lot easier to keep them between me and the 'nids if the worst came to the worst. I shot a quick glance at the hololith again, just to make sure I was making the right choice, but it seemed I was. The tyranid advance still looked most likely to skirt the Fecundia system altogether, before driving in towards the tau outposts. 'They should follow our advice without arguing too much, though. It would be the most rational thing to do.'

'Well, you'd know,' Zyvan said, fortunately without either of us knowing just how wrong he was about that, 'you've had dealings with them often enough.'

'I have,' I agreed, tactfully refraining from the 'more than enough, actually,' which would have been rather more accurate. Members of the Adeptus Mechanicus were all very well in their way, and I'd even known a few whose company I'd quite enjoyed, but even the best of them could be irritatingly single-minded, particularly on the occasions we'd been forced to make a choice between some cherished piece of junk and my even more cherished hide. Luckily, in my experience, most acolytes of the Omnissiah could be convinced to follow the path of pragmatism by reducing the debate to a simple either-or choice, where the one I liked least involved certain annihilation for us all; or, if all else failed, pointing out which one of us was currently holding the gun. I shrugged. 'After all, they need us just as badly as we need them.'

'Quite so,' Zyvan said, clearly thinking that wasn't exactly the firmest of foundations for an alliance between two of the vast number of organisations and factions making up the Imperium, let alone ourselves and a bunch of land-grabbing xenos who'd turn their guns on us again the first chance they got, if we didn't manage to do it first.

'If that's settled, then, I'll leave you to it,' I said, preparing to withdraw. Ally or not, I'd rather postpone chatting about our tactics until El'hassai had joined the exodus of his compatriots.

'Everything but the designation of the tau representative among the Imperial fleet,' Zyvan said, with a faint inclination of the head which indicated he'd rather I stayed right where I was. And with good reason.

Technically, the Commissariat would have to concur that any appointment he agreed to didn't constitute an unacceptable security risk, and having me sit in would short-circuit the ratification process nicely. Not that I'd be particularly happy with any candidate, but at least we'd be aware of who was spying on us, and able to keep them well away from anything really sensitive.

'I propose Au'lys Devrae,' El'hassai said, looking from one of us to the other, with a fine show of bafflement at our resulting expressions. 'She speaks fluent Gothic, and is of the same species, which should greatly facilitate understanding and communication.'

'Out of the question,' Zyvan said, and I nodded emphatically.

'She'd be lynched within days,' I explained. 'Most Imperial citizens would regard her as a heretic, pure and simple.'

'That complicates matters,' El'hassai said, evenly. 'We have few Gothic speakers left in the Quadravidia system, even fewer with appropriate diplomatic credentials. Since most of those are also human, they would hardly fare any better.'

'Hardly,' I agreed, straight-faced, waiting for the inevitable suggestion which, I strongly suspected, was what he'd actually intended all along.

'I will have to accompany you myself,' El'hassai said, to my complete lack of surprise.

'Of course,' Zyvan agreed, with a fine show of courtesy, and gestured to the nearest of his aides, who promptly tried to look as though he hadn't been eavesdropping on the entire conversation. 'Marlie will see to the allocation of your quarters.'

'Thank you.' El'hassai stood, and proffered a hand to the faintly baffled-looking young man. 'I will be accompanied only by a small retinue: half a dozen advisors, amanuenses and the like.'

'All tau?' I asked, trying not to picture the reaction of a typical Naval rating coming face to face with a kroot in the corridors, let alone a vespid. At least the slight humanoids looked reasonably unthreatening, unless they were stomping about in one of their battlesuits, and there didn't seem much prospect of that.

'All tau,' El'hassai assured me. 'Mainly from the water caste.'

'Mainly?' I asked, and the tau nodded. 'I believe that a fire warrior or two will assist my understanding of the tactical situation.'

'By all means,' Zyvan said, clearly not happy with the request, and equally

clearly far from surprised. But then, if I were taking passage on a xenos vessel, I'd have wanted a squad of storm troopers with me at the very least.

'I shall then delay you no longer,' El'hassai replied, and wandered away, Captain Marlie trotting at his heels like an anxious party host wondering if they've ordered enough canapés.

'Are you sure that's wise?' I asked, as soon as the door had rumbled closed behind them, and Zyvan shook his head.

'No, but what choice have I got? Donali will want to take a bodyguard, so we can hardly refuse El'hassai the same courtesy.' He shrugged. 'And it's not as if they're going to take over the ship with just a couple of pulse rifles.'

'I suppose not,' I agreed, and we got down to the serious business of working out how best to protect a world apparently devoid of any defences.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)





### *Editorial Note:*

*Since there now follows another of Cain's characteristic elisions, picking up his narrative at the point of his arrival in the Fecundia system, this seems as good a place as any to insert some of the background he so conspicuously fails to provide.*

*Sekara's travelogue, which I've drawn on extensively while editing these volumes, is of little use in this case, his entry on Fecundia consisting of nothing more than the phrase 'Dreary beyond belief.' Accordingly, I've been forced to make use of less cosmopolitan material, in order to give an accurate impression of the world on which Cain was shortly to find himself fighting for his life.*

### WELCOME TO FECUNDIA!

#### A Tithe Worker's Survival Guide

Also available in auditory and direct inload formatting.

Blessings of the Omnissiah be upon you for choosing to dedicate your life to the fabrication of His bounty.

(Please omit the preceding benediction if directed into such service by the Magistratum of your home world.)

Fecundia is a forge world, consecrated to the service of the Machine-God, and every manufactory is a temple to His greatness. The manufactoria themselves cover approximately thirty-eight per cent of the total surface area, while ancillary facilities such as habitation clusters, protein synthesis

units and atmospheric reclamators account for a further seventeen.

As a result, adequate nutrition and air sufficiently devoid of particulates to be barely carcinogenic are freely available in all work and leisure spaces, although augmetic upgrades to both digestive and respiratory systems are recommended for all long-term residents. (Your supervisor will be happy to explain the procedure for repaying the cost of such enhancements.)

Exposure to the unregulated environment is not recommended, and should be restricted to the briefest possible time, unless a full-body upgrade has been obtained. (Average redemption time for this enhancement 285,000 production hours.) Short-term exposure is survivable for the unmodified, provided full protective clothing is worn; in such a case it is essential to check joints and seals periodically for signs of corrosion.

The uninhabited areas are composed of ash desert, acid lakes, spoil ridges, and three mineralogical extraction plants. Since most indigenous resources have been consumed, recovery efforts are under way on the remaining planetary bodies and most large asteroids. Preliminary processing of extraplanetary resources is conducted in the orbital refineries, before the raw materials are delivered to the surface by direct ballistic insertion; the recovery of these payloads from the landing grounds is a job highly sought after, since every hour spent on the surface is considered to be three for the purposes of production hour computation, and many vacancies are currently available in this area.

If caught in the open, it is advisable to seek shelter immediately, particularly if the wind rises. Scourstorms are capable of abrading the hull armour of a heavy crawler, and can inflict severe injury on even augmetically enhanced humans in a matter of moments.



## SIX

I had few expectations about the world awaiting us, and those that I did were swiftly lived down to. From orbit, Fecundia resembled nothing so much as a vast pustule, swollen and livid, choked with the detritus of its industry. Much of the surface was obscured by thick clouds the colour of diarrhoea, which swirled above the hive zones,<sup>44</sup> each one of which sprawled for hundreds of kilometres in every direction. Around them was nothing but a wilderness of spoil and waste. The place had been an uninhabitable ruin before the Mechanicus moved in, and they'd hardly done much to improve it that I could see.<sup>45</sup>

'Quite a spectacle, is it not?' El'hassai remarked at my elbow, in studiedly neutral tones, and I started, having been too lost in my own thoughts to have noticed his all but silent approach.

'If you like that sort of thing,' I conceded. The night side of the world below was glowing a dull, flickering red, the light of uncountable furnaces making it look as though the whole planet was on fire. I was reminded of the volcanic hellhole I'd so recently escaped from by the skin of my teeth,<sup>46</sup> and shuddered. 'Remind you of anywhere back home?'

'Our fabricatories are less... profligate with their usage of energy,' El'hassai said, a little prissily, I thought, but then with xenos it was often hard to tell what they were really thinking.

'Good for you,' I responded reflexively, letting him pick the sarcasm out of the remark if he liked.

'It hardly looks like a tempting target for the tyranids,' he went on, clearly

choosing not to. 'Our encounters with them would tend to suggest that they prefer their planets more verdant.'

'There's about twenty billion people down there,' I corrected him. 'Even if half of them are mostly metal. And probably twice that number of servitors.<sup>47</sup> More than enough biomass to make an attack worth their while.'

'I sit corrected,' El'hassai said, raising his eyes from the cloacal world beneath us to the cold, clear void surrounding it. A few of the uncountable pinpricks of light bespattering the sable backdrop were moving against the luminescent smudge of the bulk of the galaxy, and he gestured towards them. 'The picket ships appear to be taking up their positions with commendable alacrity.'

'They do,' I agreed, although the fleet's deployment was nothing to do with me. The Naval contingent had their own commissars assigned to them, who would be sufficiently versed in three-dimensional tactics to understand what was going on. Nevertheless, I strongly suspected that most of the vessels we could see were actually cargo haulers, feeding the insatiable appetites of the furnaces below with raw materials or carrying away the spoils of their labour to half a hundred worlds.<sup>48</sup> Of more immediate concern were the troop ships carrying the Imperial Guard contingent, which should have made orbit by now, and begun ferrying soldiers to the surface ready to begin fortifying the hives. Precisely how we were going to manage that was still proving a major headache, as we had barely enough manpower to protect even one of the population centres below, let alone all of them; but at least there was little prospect of us running out of ammunition.

Before the conversation, or my thoughts, could turn in a more pessimistic direction, a familiar odour heralded the arrival of my aide. 'Bit of a mess,' he remarked, glancing out of the viewport.

'Forge worlds generally are,' I reminded him, and he nodded, with a sniff of disapproval.

'Like that last one we went to,' he agreed. 'Cak everywhere.' Then he shrugged. 'I dare say it'll be better indoors.'

'We'll find out soon enough,' I said, hoping he was right. 'I take it the shuttle's ready?'

Jurgen nodded. 'Lord General's compliments, sir, and he'd like to see you aboard it at your earliest convenience.'

'Not his exact words, I'm sure,' I said.

Jurgen shuffled his feet. 'That was the gist of it,' he said doggedly. It

would have been unkind to press him for further details, as he was evidently attempting to spare my feelings and, knowing Zyvan as well as I did, I was more than capable of filling in the blanks for myself in any case.

‘Then we’d better not keep him waiting,’ I said, turning to El’hassai, who still seemed mesmerised by the starfield beyond the armourglass. ‘Will you be joining us, ambassador?’ Truth to tell I was in two minds about asking, but protocol demanded that I did, and at least if he tagged along I’d be spared the necessity of regurgitating our discussions with the Mechanicus for his benefit at a later date. Not to mention feeling a lot more comfortable knowing where he was.

‘That would be the most efficient course of action,’ the tau agreed, turning away from the suppurating planet below and falling into step at my elbow as we made our way to the docking bay. The corridors were crowded with Guardsmen and Navy personnel, who stepped aside, with varying expressions of bemusement, hostility or repugnance at the sight of the xenos, but El’hassai ignored them all. For my own part, I barely noticed, commissars hardly being welcome anywhere they went, but Jurgen returned scowl for scowl, clearing a path for us as effectively as Zyvan’s bodyguard of storm troopers would have done.

It seemed we were to travel aboard Zyvan’s personal shuttle, which was fine by me: its deeply padded chairs and carpeting were a great deal more comfortable than the hard seats and metal decking of the more utilitarian transports I was used to taking to and from orbit, and I knew from experience that the drinks cabinet was well stocked.

‘Forget your vox-bead?’ the Lord General greeted me, as we walked up the ramp. Then his eye fell on El’hassai, a couple of paces behind, flanked by the bodyguards who’d joined him as we’d entered the hangar bay. ‘Envoy. Good of you to join us.’ If his demeanour was anything to go by, however, he would have been perfectly happy for the tau to have remained aboard the ship.

Sure enough, as I settled into my chair and accepted the amasec Jurgen poured out for me, Zyvan leaned closer, and lowered his voice. ‘Are you sure that’s a good idea?’ he asked, *sotto voce*.

‘We’re meant to be in an alliance,’ I reminded him, equally quietly. There was little chance of being overheard above the rising note of the engines, but you never knew with xenos,<sup>49</sup> so I kept my voice low nevertheless. ‘The cogboys know we’ve got a delegation aboard, so why not let him sit in on

the initial meeting?’

‘If you think they’ll wear it,’ Zyvan said, shrugging.

‘Why wouldn’t they?’ I asked, in honest bemusement.

Zyvan shrugged again, and took an appreciative sip of his amasec. ‘Why do the cogboys do anything?’ he asked, reasonably enough.

Our descent was as smooth and untroubled as we could have hoped for, the buffeting as we entered the atmosphere mild enough even for Jurgen’s sensitive stomach; but then Zyvan’s personal pilot would have been one of the finest in the fleet, so that was hardly surprising. The view of the world through the viewports hardly improved as we approached it, the thick clouds of corrosive smog I’d seen from orbit blanketing the ground until we’d almost reached the surface for which I could only be grateful, judging by the brief glimpses of what awaited us that I was able to catch through the occasional gap.

At length, bright, flashing luminators stabbed through the murk, guiding us towards the landing zone, and I began to discern the vast bulk of the primary manufacturing complex below and around our hurrying shuttle, looming out of the smog like a volcanic mountain range. The light of the beacons was joined by innumerable others, speckling the oppressive mass of artificial cliff faces surrounding us, or carried aboard the shoal of other air traffic among which we moved, like minnows skirting the ramparts of a reef. A not unapt comparison, I suppose, as, like a reef, the hive had accreted gradually, by the actions of uncountable individuals, over thousands of years. Eventually, it would wither and die, the resources it had been put here to plunder exhausted, and the Mechanicus would uproot themselves and begin again on some other lump of rock unfortunate enough to possess something they wanted.<sup>50</sup>

‘Aren’t we heading for the main shuttle pads?’ I asked, as, with a surge of acceleration which left Jurgen looking distinctly green around the gills even by his standards, our pilot lifted us out of the main traffic, to soar majestically over the rising peaks of the hive range.

‘The magi running this place want to keep our meeting discreet,’ Zyvan said, and I nodded, approving. Trying to work out an effective strategy was going to be hard enough as it was, without getting bogged down in official receptions and all that sort of thing. Especially as tech-priests weren’t exactly renowned for throwing a good party.

‘Where, then?’ I asked, and Zyvan gestured towards a spire, topped with a cogwheel icon big enough to have parked a Baneblade on each of the spurs.<sup>51</sup>

‘The Spire of Blessed Computation,’ he said, squinting at the data-slate in his hand. It was a plain, military field model, incongruously drab against the garish dress uniform he’d put on for the occasion, but he was, as ever, more concerned with the practicalities. I’d often thought that he’d prefer to do without any of the ornamentation and ceremony which surrounded him if he could, but he was just as trammelled by the protocols of his position as I was by mine. I must have looked puzzled, because he added, ‘it’s where most of this miserable rock’s run from.’

‘Good choice, then,’ I said. The closer we were to the cogboys’ command centre, the easier it would be to liaise with them.

‘I’m glad you approve,’ Zyvan said, not entirely joking.

The spire was so close by now that it was blotting out much of the hive, its upper storeys becoming clearer as we glided towards it through the ocean of murk. The sun was barely visible, discernable only as a luminescent disc, dim enough to look at directly, glimmering wanly through the clotted brown clouds walling us off from the rest of the universe so that we were almost entirely reliant on the luminators to see where we were going. I thumbed my palm,<sup>52</sup> and hoped the pilot had a reliable auspex. From this distance the sides which had seemed so smooth from a couple of kilometres away looked gnarled, like the bark of an impossibly tall tree, encrusted with thousands of protruding substructures, vents, antennae, and work platforms. Servitors and spirejacks, armoured against the hellish conditions of the open air, swarmed around it, doing Emperor knew what.

‘That must be it,’ Jurgen said, with a sigh of relief which gave me the full benefit of his halitosis, and prompted a brief, envious glance at the full face helmets sported by El’hassai’s fire warrior escort. I followed the direction of his gaze, and found we were descending towards a small landing platform, jutting from the vertical face of the spire, one of many such lost among the myriad of excrescences.

‘Looks that way,’ I agreed, narrowing my eyes to peer through the curdled air. Landing lights were flashing, guiding our pilot in, and striking flickering highlights from the augmetic enhancements of the honour guard of scarlet-uniformed skitarii lining up beside the doorway leading inside the tower. A thought struck me, and I glanced at Zyvan in some consternation.

‘They surely don’t expect us to step outside, do they?’

‘It won’t be for long,’ he assured me. ‘Magos Dysen says short-term exposure to the atmosphere is quite harmless.’

‘Quite,’ I said, inflecting it like assent, while ruminating on just how much imprecision the simple little word might be reflecting. ‘It’s all right for him, he doesn’t have lungs to frak up in any case.’<sup>53</sup>

‘Not biological ones, at any rate,’ Zyvan said. But before we could debate the matter further, a faint tremor in the hull plating told us that the pilot had landed with just as much skill as I would have expected, and the time for conversation was past.





## SEVEN

The first thing to strike me as we strode down the ramp was the smell, a thick, sulphurous humidity which slapped me in the face like a flannel soaked in tepid swamp water. The heat boiled up around us through the stinking air, rising from the manufactoria below in urgent, foetid thermal gusts, as though the forges themselves were constantly breaking wind. Even forewarned as I was, I coughed, almost gagging, envying the tau warriors their respirators in earnest now.

‘Smells a bit,’ Jorgen observed, oblivious to the irony as ever, while I fell into place beside Zyvan and the small knot of aides who had accompanied him. Not trusting myself to reply, and breathing as shallowly as I could, I merely nodded.

The landing platform was smaller than I’d realised, barely large enough to hold the shuttle, and my already good opinion of our pilot was raised another notch. The craft’s nose was only a handful of metres from the wall, close to where the inviting illuminated rectangle of the doorway gaped open, while the starboard landing skid was even closer to the vertiginous three-kilometre drop into the heart of the furnaces. With a shudder, I realised the outer edge was without a balustrade or even a handrail to check a careless misstep, and resolved to keep the bulk of the utility craft between me and oblivion. Clearly, the tech-priests who worked here regarded a sense of self-preservation as superfluous to requirements.

‘Nicely done,’ Zyvan congratulated our pilot over his vox-bead, and turned to me. ‘He put us down where we can use the shuttle as a

windbreak.'

'For which we should all thank the Throne,' I agreed, feeling my greatcoat flapping like a pennon in the gale-force gusts passing the hull. Without it, I'd have been hard-pressed to remain on my feet. An alarming vision of being picked up and flung into the void by the turbulent air flashed through my mind, and I suppressed it firmly.

'Welcome,' the officer in charge of the skitarii detachment said in the flat drone of a vox-coder, making the cogwheel gesture generally favoured by followers of the Machine-God as he did so. 'Centurion Kyper, Primus Pilem, Cohort Fecundia.' Like most of the skitarii I'd come across in the course of my erratic progress around the galaxy, he looked more like a heavily-augmented ogryn than anything human, his musculature bulging with chemical enhancement and interlaced with bionics.

'At ease,' Zyvan said, not bothering to introduce himself; if Kyper didn't realise at once who he was, he had no business being there. He gestured in my direction. 'Commissar Cain is accompanying me, along with the tau envoy, and his escort.'

'Tau envoy?' Kyper echoed, sounding as surprised as his even mechanical buzz allowed. I could see little of his face inside the hood protecting it from the elements, and most of what I could was too metallic to allow any expression to register, but I didn't need to look him in the eye to realise he was rattled. He began chirruping rapidly in binaric to his two companions, both of whom were dwarfed by the hulking combat servitor at the end of the receiving line. 'We were not informed of this.'

'It was a last-minute decision,' I said, my voice rasping through the thin coating of ash, and no doubt other less savoury substances, obstructing my larynx.

'He must remain on the shuttle,' Kyper said firmly.

'That's not your decision to make,' Zyvan snapped, in the tone of a man to whom putting obstructive underlings in their place had long ago become second nature.

'Is there some difficulty?' El'hassai asked, appearing at the bottom of the boarding ramp, his words punctuated by small, precise coughs. He addressed the skitarii directly. 'My diplomatic credentials have been fully approved by—'

'Unsanctified presence,' the combat servitor cut in, lumbering into motion. 'Purge and reconsecrate.'

‘Call that thing off!’ I bellowed, in my best put-the-fear-of-the-Emperor-into-’em voice. But before Kyper could move an augmetically enhanced muscle, the construct had raised its autocannon arm, and rattled off a burst of heavy-calibre rounds which whined and ricocheted from the now badly dented boarding ramp. El’hassai scuttled back up it with commendable alacrity, and the servitor plodded forward, heading towards the shuttle with murder obviously in mind.

‘Get back in the air!’ Zyvan voxed the pilot, but he’d cut the engines as soon as we’d landed, no doubt anticipating a long and tedious wait for our preliminary discussions to be completed, and we all knew there was no way the shuttle could lift before the servitor got to it.

I retuned my vox-bead just in time to hear the pilot acknowledge the order. ‘Powering up,’ he said, and the main engines burst into life with a roar which rattled my teeth. ‘Fifteen seconds to take-off thrust.’

‘We don’t have fifteen seconds!’ I snapped. ‘The damn thing will be aboard by then! Raise the ramp!’

‘I’m already trying,’ the pilot informed me, his voice ringing with the forced calm of an expert in a crisis. ‘That autocannon burst disabled the servos.’

‘Then take it out!’ I ordered, with an eye on the chin-turreted multilaser beneath the cockpit.

‘I can’t target it,’ the pilot told me, with the air of a man following bad news with worse. ‘It’s already inside the range.’

‘Then we’ll have to do it!’ I turned to the skitarii. ‘Open fire, or call it off. Your choice.’

They chirruped at one another in consternation for a moment.

‘With regret, commissar, we can do neither,’ Kyper told me. ‘The unit is programmed to protect the spire from unauthorised entry, and damaging it would run counter to the tenets of the Omnissiah. I can request the appropriate termination codes from a higher authority, but...’

‘Oh for frak’s sake!’ I expostulated, drawing my sidearm. Taking on a fully armoured combat servitor went against all my instincts of self-preservation, but if El’hassai died, I knew who’d get the blame; he wouldn’t even have been there if I hadn’t invited him. I cracked off a couple of shots at the construct’s armour-plated back, with nothing more in mind than diverting its attention long enough for the pilot to get into the air, before bolting for the safety of the doorway. But even as I turned, the portal hissed

shut, trapping us on the narrow landing stage. ‘Now what?’ I snapped, exasperated.

‘The machine-spirits are sealing the spire in response to the weapons fire.’ Kyper said.

At which point the flaw in my plan became obvious. The servitor turned, ponderously, and brought its weapon arm around to point at me. ‘Hostile action initiated,’ it droned. ‘Retaliate. Retaliate.’

I jumped for my life as a line of autocannon rounds chewed up the rockcrete towards me, Zyvan and his aides scattering away from the line of fire like startled waterfowl, and rolled to my feet, cracking off another shot, hoping to hit something vital. No such luck, of course, anything vulnerable was tucked well away behind the armour plate.

‘Allow me, sir,’ Jurgen said, opening up with a burst from his lasgun. Predictably, it had little effect, although it did check the thing’s progress for a moment as it swung to let off a burst in his direction, which whined and ricocheted from the landing skid behind which he’d taken refuge. Then it turned back towards me, apparently intent on dealing with one thing at a time.<sup>54</sup>

‘Requesting shutdown codes, authorisation Alpha Beige Zero Zero Seven Six Eight Cantata,’ Kyper said, apparently over some internal vox-link. ‘Urgency utmost.’ At least he was finally doing something, but unless he did it fast, it was going to be too late for me.

I dived aside again, chips of rockcrete from the near miss stinging my face, and came up facing the shuttle, just as the pitch of its engines rose to a scream. Brown fog swirled around my ankles, made turbulent by the backwash, and I ran towards the jammed ramp as hard as I could. It was a desperate gamble, but at the moment it looked like being the best of a lot of bad options, most of which were liable to end up with me dead.

‘Lifting now!’ the pilot called, and I leapt desperately for the rising slab of metal, feeling the edge of it slamming into my midriff, driving the air from my lungs (which, considering its quality, was probably no bad thing). At which point I became all too aware of the pistol in my hand, which rather precluded grabbing hold of anything else.

I barely had time to swear before I felt myself slithering back towards the lip of the drop. Flailing desperately, I managed to get a grip on one of the retaining bolts with my free hand, which left me dangling like a half-landed fish, while the panorama of the hive wheeled vertiginously below me. Why

I didn't simply let the laspistol go, I have no idea, but by that point I was probably too terrified to have opened my fingers if I'd tried.

'Hold on, sir!' Jurgen voxed, which struck me as the single most superfluous piece of advice I'd ever received. Then the servitor opened fire again, the heavy calibre rounds stitching a line of impact craters along the underside of the ramp, missing my wildly kicking legs by far too narrow a margin for comfort, and I divined the reason for his warning. Why it should have continued to take its spite out on the shuttle, instead of turning on my aide the minute it had a clear shot at him, I'll never know, but it continued to target us with the single-minded vindictiveness of an ork.<sup>55</sup>

'Starboard engine hit,' the pilot said, his veneer of professional detachment sounding thinner than ever, and the shuttle lurched sickeningly, almost dislodging my precarious hold. My shoulder muscles were screaming in protest by now, my arm feeling as though it was about to come free of its socket. A plume of thick black smoke, looking perfectly at home in what passed for an atmosphere around here, began seeping from the engine pod, whirling away to play with its friends rising from the furnaces so far below. If I fell, I'd probably be immolated before I hit the ground (or the roof of something, at any rate), which was hardly the most reassuring of thoughts. 'I'll have to set down again.'

Crushing me like a bug in the process. 'Stay airborne!' I yelled desperately, hoping to appeal to his sense of duty. My own predicament was hardly likely to give him pause, commissars hardly being the most popular of figures among the military.<sup>56</sup> 'If you land, that thing'll kill the ambassador!'

'It's land, or crash,' the pilot said stubbornly, 'and he certainly won't survive that!'

'Your concern for my welfare is most gratifying,' a familiar voice cut in, raised over the whine of our abused engine, the roar of air buffeting into the confined space above the ramp, and the metallic whine and clatter of another fusillade from below. 'But I believe I shall be adequately protected.' A slender, four-fingered hand<sup>57</sup> wrapped itself around my wrist and pulled, with surprising strength. He wasn't able to haul me onboard entirely by his own efforts, of course,<sup>58</sup> but I got enough of a boost to shift my centre of mass firmly onto the wildly bucking ramp, and after that it was relatively easy to haul myself to safety.

'Thank you,' I said, making it to my feet with some difficulty, and shoving

the laspistol back in its holster at last. There was no more time for conversation, though, as the landing platform was growing ever larger, the murderous servitor continuing to blaze away at us as we descended. It seemed our pilot was too busy trying to get us down in one piece to retaliate with the multilaser.<sup>59</sup> I stumbled as the shuttle lurched again, and clutched reflexively at El'hassai for support, fortuitously dragging him aside as the stream of autocannon rounds chewed up the bulkhead where he'd been standing a moment before. 'I hope this protection of yours is ready when we hit.'

'It is,' El'hassai assured me, and, looking round, I saw that the pair of fire warriors had accompanied the tau diplomat onto the ramp. Each drew a thin line from somewhere in the recesses of their armour and clipped them firmly around stanchions at the top, freeing their hands to handle their weapons. A second later, twin plasma bolts streaked from their pulse rifles, impacting squarely on the rogue servitor.

'Good shooting!' I called, even though they probably didn't understand a word I said. Encouraging the troops had become an ingrained habit by now, particularly when I was in the firing line. 'That's put paid to it!'

My elation turned out to be somewhat premature, however, the Adeptus Mechanicus having done the job of building the thing rather too well. The construct staggered under the barrage – which, I noted with approval, Jurgen was adding to with the dogged determination I'd become so familiar with over the course of our long association – then recovered, attempting to raise the fused stump of its autocannon once again as it recovered its balance.

'That's drawn its teeth, at least,' Zyvan voxed, with clear approval. I caught a glimpse of his hand hovering over his sidearm, undoubtedly itching to draw it and take a crack at the thing himself, but it was going to be hard enough smoothing things over with our hosts already, without him blowing holes in one of their toys as well.

Then the deckplates beneath my feet rose up as the shuttle smacked into the landing stage with a bone-jarring impact, throwing El'hassai and myself to the floor. The tau just had time to shout something in his own tongue, though whether it was an urgent enquiry about how his compatriots were faring, or simple profanity of the sort I was giving voice to, I had no idea. The shuttle bounced, struck the pad again, and finally came to rest, the deckplates canted at an odd angle.

‘Good landing,’ I voxed to the pilot, the palpable relief in my voice dispelling all possible suspicion of sarcasm.

‘Better bail out while you can,’ he responded, popping the emergency seals in the cockpit as he spoke and scrambling down a rope ladder to the deck. The shuttle shifted slightly as his weight dropped away from it, and with a thrill of horror I suddenly understood why the little craft was tilted at so sharp an angle. In his hurry to get us down, and with his control of the ship impaired by the damage the rogue servitor had inflicted, the pilot hadn’t been able to land entirely on the platform. We were teetering on the edge, buffeted by the irregular gales rising from the depths below, and it only needed a particularly strong gust to overbalance us altogether.

‘Acknowledged!’ I snapped, then turned back to El’hassai, who was staggering to his feet alongside me. ‘We need to get out now. This bag of bolts is going over the side at any moment!’

‘Ra’sncr’ns and Gl’den’sn,’ he replied, which flummoxed me for a moment, during which I examined him surreptitiously for any visible signs of head trauma, before I followed the direction of his eyes and realised he was talking about his bodyguards. ‘Are they dead?’

‘They’re definitely not well,’ I replied, hurrying to the nearest, whichever it was. He (or she, I’ve never found it that easy to tell, even without the body armour, and it only matters to another tau anyway) was hanging slackly from the cable they’d used to brace themselves with. Unable to work out how to detach it, I simply drew my chainsword and severed it with a single swipe, catching the comatose warrior as he fell. He stirred feebly as my arm closed to support him, which at least answered one question, although if I’m honest, under the circumstances, I’d have preferred to find a corpse I could abandon at once without losing face. Unwilling to waste any more time, I hefted him across my shoulder, and turned to see how El’hassai was doing with the other.

The second warrior seemed able to walk, thank the Throne, although he was leaning on El’hassai heavily enough to slow them both down, which meant I was three or four paces ahead of them as I jumped the metre or so to the smooth rockcrete of the landing deck. With sixty-odd kilos of xenos<sup>60</sup> weighing me down, my landing was far from elegant, which was hardly surprising, all things considered. Just as well, too; as I stumbled, a whining chain blade slashed through the place where my head would have been. I recoiled reflexively, dropping the fire warrior in the process, and rolled

under another swipe. The servitor turned to follow me, its left leg dragging a little, which let me open the distance between us nicely.

‘I can’t get a clear shot, sir!’ Jurgen yelled, from the direction of the doorway. Everyone else was clustered around it, arguing and gesticulating, which was bad news from where I was standing. Even if they managed to get it open, I’d never reach safety through the crush. I’d just have to keep holding the construct off, and hope for the best.

‘I have obtained the shutdown codes for the unit,’ Kyper droned, not before time if you asked me. ‘Transmitting them now.’

‘Much obliged,’ I told him, rejecting the pithier alternatives which had occurred to me in the interests of diplomacy, and took up a guard position with my chainsword. I might as well look suitably heroic now the worst of the danger was past, and there was no telling how long the shutdown order might take to kick in anyhow. Just as well I did, too. No sooner had I got the blade up than the blasted thing took another hack at me, which I parried purely by reflex. Sparks flew as the whirling blades clashed, and I stepped back again, ducking under the raised nose of the shuttle. ‘Soon would be good.’

‘Retrying,’ Kyper said, the single word sending an understandable chill through me. ‘The servitor’s communication nodes appear to be compromised by battle damage.’

‘No kidding,’ I said, deflecting another lightning-swift blow, and hacking hopefully at the construct’s exposed innards on the backstroke. The tau weapons might not have stopped it, but they’d cracked its shell like a cooked crustacean. I was rewarded with a foul-smelling spray of mingled ichor and lubricants, but the thing barely slowed, and I dodged another slash in the nick of time, ducking around the landing leg beneath the nose. As the servitor’s blade slammed into it, the whole shuttle shifted, with an ominous grating sound, and I started back, only to find myself a mere three or four strides from the brink of the abyss.

There was little time to worry about that, though, as the servitor continued to close, ignoring the steady plinking of lasgun rounds against its back. Jurgen was losing no time in resuming the offensive now that the strut was affording me some cover from the occasional stray round which missed the target. The crackling, spark-spitting servitor and I became locked in a lethal waltz, hacking and slashing at one another around the thick metal obstruction, spinning this way and that in an attempt to find an opening in



the other's defences, or parrying a sudden unexpected blow. A game in which I had the advantage in the short-term, instinct and intellect keeping me ahead of the construct's limited repertoire of pre-programmed moves, but an advantage which would be swiftly eroded as I tired in the face of its unrelenting onslaught.

As I continued to trade blow for blow with the mechanical killer, El'hassai finally jumped clear of the teetering shuttle, his floundering arrival on the landing deck accompanied by the other armoured warrior. The flurry of movement in the corner of my eye as they hit, staggered and fell snatched at my attention for a potentially fatal second. Only reflexes honed in uncountable practice drills and far too many encounters like this one preserved me from decapitation. As it was, I raised my own blade in the nick of time, without conscious awareness of the movement, to deflect what would have otherwise been a lethal outcome to the moment of distraction.

'Get out of the way!' I yelled, aware only that they were now blocking Jurgen's line of fire. The tau seemed to interpret this as concern for their welfare, however, as El'hassai turned to wave briefly in my direction before helping his companion back to his feet. As he did, I noticed the safety line still hanging from the fire warrior's equipment pouch, and a desperate idea began to form. 'Ambassador! The cable!'

'The cable?' El'hassai asked, his voice issuing from the comm-bead in my ear, and I blessed Zyvan's foresight in giving him limited access to our vox-net. 'What of it?'

'Can you get it off his armour?' I asked, the simple question punctuated with blows and parries to such an extent it felt diced into its component syllables. Quick on the uptake, El'hassai wasted no time in a verbal reply, merely fiddling with some kind of catch and holding up a small box, about a palm's width across, as it came free. 'Good! Chuck it over!'

Well, he did his best, but he was a diplomat, not an athlete. The little box arced through the air in my general direction, clanged from the underside of the ominously groaning shuttle, and clattered to the rockcrete terrace about three metres away, rather too close to the edge of the drop for my liking. 'My apologies,' he said, with a final glance over his shoulder at me and his comatose compatriot, before scuttling for the door as fast as his companion's stumbling gait would allow.

'Don't worry about it,' I said, certain that he wasn't exactly going to lose a lot of sleep anyway. I feinted to the right, as though about to break left,

hoping the construct would react as predictably as I thought it would. Luckily it did, taking a ponderous step round to the left to intercept the real movement. Which I never took, carrying on the rightward lunge after only the most fractional of pauses, praying to the Emperor I wasn't about to take on a chainblade with my teeth.

Maybe He was listening for once, or maybe it's true what they say about fortune favouring the foolish, but by the time the servitor realised I wasn't where it thought I was going to be I'd hit the rockcrete hard, my outstretched hand scrabbling for the tau's cable reel. For a moment I thought it was sliding out of reach, but I batted it back with the edge of my chainsword, feeling the toes of my boots slipping out over the abyss for a heart-stopping moment; then the strangely-shaped lump of polymer was in my hand, and I scrambled back from the edge, breathing hard.

'Look out, sir!' Jorgen warned as I rose to my knees, and I turned to see the servitor plodding after me with relentless determination, shouldering the landing strut as it strode past. With an ominous grating sound, the precariously balanced shuttle shifted again, and I distinctly felt an answering shudder in the rockcrete. The servitor swept its blade down, spraying me with gravel and chippings as the whirling teeth ground through the rockcrete, and I scrabbled backwards. As I rose to my feet my head clanged painfully against the sloping metal belly of the stranded shuttle, only the padding of my cap preventing me from being stunned by the unexpected blow. This was bad. I was hemmed in, with no line of retreat.

'How do I work this thing?' I voxed, parrying yet another triphammer blow from the relentless machine, shuffling sideways in a crouch to retreat as far beneath the tilting hull as I could. The servitor was unable to stoop, and I hoped it wouldn't be able to reach me so easily there.

'Pull out as much line as you need, and lock off with the safety catch,' El'hassai told me, as though this was something everyone should know. I tugged at the end, experimentally, and found the reel inside the little box ran free, without a hint of snagging or friction. A small indented switch near the hole snicked into place as I prodded it, and the whole thing locked up solid. So far, so good. 'Releasing it again will rewind the cable automatically.'

'That won't be an issue,' I assured him, fumbling the box around in search of something else to press. 'How do I get it to stick?'

'The flat side of the casing will adhere by molecular bonding if you activate the upper control, the pad at the end of the cable adheres if you

activate the lower,' El'hassai explained, with commendable brevity.

'Got it,' I said, parrying another mechanically predictable swipe from my lumbering opponent as I spoke, wondering how long my luck would continue to hold out. I slapped the flat side of the little box against the underside of the shuttle, convinced as I did so that I could feel the whole vessel shifting slightly under my hand,<sup>61</sup> and squeezed the button El'hassai had indicated. To my vague surprise, it held.<sup>62</sup>

Now for the difficult part. Pressing the second button, I swung the end of the cable, in an arc in front of me, whipping it back and forth in a figure of eight, using the cable to fend off the construct. As I'd hoped, it reacted at once, swinging the stump of its autocannon around to entangle the line, intending to reel me in to a messy encounter with its chainblade. Timing the movement exactly, I swung up my own weapon to deflect the blow, and rolled out beneath it, coming to my feet behind its elbow. Despite the temptation to get in a parting blow, I dug my toes into the rockcrete and ran as hard as I could towards my companions.

'The shutdown procedure is still failing,' Kyper said, sounding as disgruntled as possible with a mechanically filtered voice.

'Then forget it. Just get the bloody door open!' I snarled. Finding the unconscious tau in my way, and all too aware of the audience clustered around the door, I resisted the temptation to hurdle him and keep going, opting instead to stoop as I passed and grab an arm. Dragging him with me hardly helped my progress, needless to say, and I turned, expecting to see the servitor bearing down on me again. To my relief, though, it was right where I'd left it, anchored to the downed shuttle, well out of chainblade reach. I began to relax.

'Be right with you, sir,' a familiar voice said, and I was joined by Jurgen's body odour, followed an instant later by the man himself. He took the tau's other arm, which speeded us up nicely.

'Thank you, Jurgen,' I said, as we reached the locked portal. I turned, just in time to see the shuttle shift, with a loud groaning of overstressed metal and the shriek of rending hull plates. Then, almost too quickly to register, it had gone, vanishing over the lip of the abyss, dragging the servitor with it.

'One thing I'll say for you, Ciaphas,' Zyvan said, after a moment of horrified silence, which was eventually broken by a reverberating boom from somewhere near the base of the spire. 'You really know how to make an entrance.'

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## EIGHT

Needless to say, our spectacular arrival hadn't exactly made a favourable impression on our hosts. Our reception was decidedly frosty, even by the woeful standard of hospitality usually enjoyed by guests of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Once we finally got inside the spire, and not before time if my aching lungs were anything to go by, the contrast with the outside world was stark, to say the least. I'd been in enough Mechanicus shrines over the years to find the chill, filtered air, with its pervasive scent of ozone, volatiles, and charring insulation familiar enough, as was the over-abundance of polished steel surfaces and embossed cogwheels. The usual specimens of venerated mech-junk were scattered about the place, protected from the grubby fingers and mechadendrites of the curious onlooker by cases of meticulously-burnished glass, while the overly-bright luminators did their best to make the metal walls shine in an appropriately reverential manner.

Kyper and his skitarii hurried us through the labyrinth of corridors, which differed only in the arrangement of the technotheological knick-knacks littering the walls, as fast as they could, presumably in an attempt to prevent the xenos from seeing very much; although, given the condition of two of them, that wasn't particularly rapid, and only El'hassai was well enough to sightsee in any case. Not that he seemed the remotest bit interested in doing so, dividing his attention more or less equally between his limping companion, and the one being carried as gently as possible by the most junior pair of Zyvan's underlings.

‘I’ve seen happier cogboys,’ I muttered to the Lord General, heedless of the augmented hearing the skitarii probably possessed. None of them gave any sign of having heard me, they just went on chirruping agitatedly at one another in their teeth-aching private language, no doubt making sure that whatever blame might be going around for the debacle on the landing pad, it wouldn’t be alighting on them.

‘How could you tell?’ he riposted, with a sour look at our escort. ‘None of the ones I ever met could crack a smile without splitting their heads open.’

‘Wait here,’ Kyper told us, as we reached a pair of bronze doors roughly twice the height they needed to be for a normal man to enter, although I suppose those tended to be in short supply around here. He shoved the left-hand one open, just wide enough to slip through, and slammed it closed behind him with a boom which echoed uncomfortably around us, reminding me all too clearly of our shuttle’s terminal impact among the forges so short a time before.

‘I’ll do no such thing,’ Zyvan declared, his beard bristling, and strode forward to seize the handle. The skitarii moved to block him, and he glared at them, utterly affronted. ‘I’m the Lord-bloody-General of the Rimward Sectors, and I don’t wait for anyone. They wait for *me!*’

In the silence that followed, I distinctly heard the scuffle and click of sidearms being loosened in their holsters behind us, his aides having no option but to follow the Lord General’s lead. Any exchange of fire with the skitarii would have been suicidal, of course, they were all augmented to the gills, and I had no doubt that the hellguns they carried were the least of the lethal surprises they kept about their persons. Moreover, they were hardwired for combat, and would probably open fire purely by reflex the moment they felt threatened. Of rather more concern to me, however, was the fact that I was standing right between the two factions, in the perfect spot to be riddled by the crossfire. Definitely time to put a stop to this.

‘Perhaps we should simply withdraw,’ I said, stepping forwards to place a restraining hand on Zyvan’s arm, before he could shoulder the door open. I was certain that if he did, trusting in the authority of his position to protect him, the skitarii’s neural programming would interpret the movement as a hostile act, and they’d open fire as surely as heretics were damned. ‘If the Adeptus Mechanicus doesn’t want our help, we can use the resources we brought here in the defence of other systems.’

‘Don’t think I’m not tempted,’ Zyvan snarled, turning to address me

directly. No one else could have got away with grabbing his arm like that, but the red sash gives you a lot of leeway,<sup>63</sup> and, to my relief, it seemed he was in the mood to listen. ‘It’s still more than likely that the ’nids’ll just sail straight on past this pustule on the arse of the galaxy anyway.’

I tapped the comm-bead in my ear, through which I’d been monitoring our erstwhile pilot’s conversation with flight control aboard the flagship. Under less fraught circumstances, I’d have found it quite entertaining, as they hadn’t reacted entirely happily to the news that our shuttle had become an expensive pile of scrap, and we’d quite like another one as soon as they could manage it. ‘Then I suggest we return to the landing platform,’ I said. ‘A replacement shuttle’s on the way, and if we wait for it there, we can avoid any further unfortunate misunderstandings.’

At which point the door jerked open with quite unnecessary force, confirming my guess that at least one of the skitarii had been relaying our discussion to whoever was waiting inside. Kyper appeared in the gap, almost nose to olfactory sensor plate with Zyvan and myself, looking as agitated as possible with a face composed almost entirely of motionless ironmongery. ‘Lord General,’ he droned, standing aside and gesturing expansively with an arm which would have looked rather more inviting without quite so much serrated metal grafted along the edge of it, ‘you are welcome.’

‘Since when?’ Zyvan muttered to me, but strode into the chamber beyond without further comment, or backward glance at the rest of us. I followed, with the semblance of a courteous nod at the centurion turned commissioner, Jurgen falling into place at my shoulder as reliably as always. Zyvan’s underlings surged forwards too, only to be checked by Kyper’s upraised hand.

‘The xenos may not set foot in the Sanctum of Ratiocination,’ he insisted firmly. ‘They are to be returned to your ship with all dispatch.’

‘The tau delegation is here at my personal invitation,’ I said, ignoring him, in favour of getting a good look at the chamber I’d just entered. It was high, vaulted in precious metals, and dominated by a huge icon of the Emperor in His aspect of the Machine-God. A crescent of seats, each with a data lectern planted firmly in front of it, enclosed a raised dais, on which a venerable tech-priest, so heavily augmented he barely seemed to qualify as human any more, was attended by a gaggle of junior acolytes and a couple of hovering servo-skulls. The surrounding seats were full of other magi, most of them

heavily enhanced as well, although one seemed to retain a fair amount of her original flesh: enough, at least, to show some semblance of an expression on her face, although, like a good little tech-priest, she was trying to look impassive, rather than agog at the drama unfolding in front of her. 'I appreciate that they're hardly natural allies, but we do have common cause against the tyranids.'

'That is not the issue,' the pile of machine parts on the dais grated, as though affronted at having to communicate with us by something as imprecise as Gothic.<sup>64</sup> 'They defile the domain of the Omnissiah with their unhallowed devices!' He glared through the door at the armoured fire warriors, the lenses of his optical filters seeming to flare red with wrath, although I suppose it was simply the reflection of his robe. Pretty much everyone in the room was wearing some shade of the colour, apart from a couple in white,<sup>65</sup> and I wondered briefly if the subtle variations in hue were signifiers of status in some way. Then again, it could equally well have reflected the number of times the garment had been to the laundry.

'Then the matter is easily remedied,' El'hassai said, apparently refusing to take offence, although Throne knows I would have done in his place. He removed something from his ear, then delved into his pockets, and handed the comm-bead and a few other items I didn't recognise to the limping warrior. 'All examples of tau technology will be returned to the landing pad forthwith, to await the arrival of the shuttle.'

'They'd be better destroyed,' the woman advised, and the presiding magos chirruped and hummed for a moment, apparently communing with his colleagues in the fashion of their kind.

'Removal will suffice,' he said at last, somewhat grudgingly if I was any judge. 'On the strict understanding that no xenos device pollutes the sanctity of Fecundia again.' It was clear that what he really meant was any bearer of such devices, but under the circumstances he could hardly say so in so many words. 'As it is, we must simply bear the intolerable affront of their presence for a short while longer.'

'Intolerable affront?' Zyvan roared, still in no mood for diplomacy himself. 'You opened fire on us, destroyed our shuttle, and damn near killed Commissar Cain! *That's* an affront, you self-righteous bag of bolts!' He turned on his heel, apparently on the point of marching out of the room. 'I wish you luck with the tyranids, because unless I hear an apology in the next five seconds, we're leaving orbit as soon as we dock!'



‘Lord General,’ the woman said, rising to her feet with a glare at her superior which didn’t need the almost inaudible squeal of a binary exchange that accompanied it to transmit the message. Zyvan hesitated; if anyone else had spoken at that point, I truly believe he’d have made good on his threat, or at least given me a hard time arguing him out of it. His temper was not easily roused, but quite formidable when it was, and it hadn’t taken me long to realise why having a commissar around when he was most liable to be irritated was a good idea. But the clear feminine voice had taken him by surprise, cutting through the fog of anger with which he’d surrounded himself. ‘Magos Dysen may have chosen his words a little carelessly. Few of us, I’m afraid, are used to discoursing with those from outside our order.’

‘Quite,’ the magos grated, not happy to have his face saved by an underling (or the front of his head, anyway, since he no longer possessed anything which could fairly be described as facial features). ‘Magos Kildhar is correct. No offence was intended. Had we been aware that the xenos would be accompanying you, the servitor’s cortex would have been amended with appropriate updates to its instruction set.’

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘It was all a bit dramatic, but no harm done in the end.’ A disturbing thought belatedly crossed my mind. ‘There wasn’t anyone under that shuttle when it went over the edge, was there?’

‘No one of any significance,’ Kildhar assured me.

‘Production of mattocks, trivets and flue dampers will be significantly disrupted, however,’ one of the seated tech-priests put in, sounding distinctly affronted. ‘Extensive repairs to the manufactory will be required.’

‘We have, however, gained significant amounts of refined raw materials,’ another cut in, equally determined to look on the bright side. He glanced at Zyvan. ‘Unless you wish the component parts of the shuttle returned to you? I am assured it is beyond repair.’

‘Help yourself,’ Zyvan said gruffly, his anger beginning to dissipate. Like most tech-priests, these idiots were clearly in a world of their own, into which the real galaxy seldom intruded. Unfortunately, one of its least pleasant facets was about to descend on them in uncountable numbers unless we did something about it, and Zyvan’s pique notwithstanding, we had little option other than doing our best to defend them. Though it still seemed as if the tau border worlds were more likely to be targeted, we couldn’t take that for granted. Losing Fecundia, and the munitions produced there, could cost us half the sector, and as little as that only if we were

lucky.

‘Then perhaps we’d better get down to business,’ I suggested, giving them something other than their real or imagined grievances to think about. There were, of course, no chairs for visitors anywhere in the chamber, but it didn’t take long to remedy that deficiency once I’d tactfully pointed it out. Dysen tweedled grumpily at one of his servo-skulls, which scooted out of the chamber, returning a few minutes later at the head of a small comet tail of servitors bearing seats fashioned of bright polished steel, the backs filigreed into a representation of the Holy Cogwheel. Hideously uncomfortable, but the chairs our hosts were sitting in were almost identical so it would have been churlish to complain, although I’ll wager the bloody things were a good deal better suited to their tin arses than to our natural ones. As the meeting wore on, I even began to feel a kind of wistful nostalgia for the tau mushrooms.

‘The good news,’ Zyvan said, taking full advantage of his status as the senior military member of the expedition to remain on his feet while he conducted the briefing, ‘is that the main hive fleet is continuing on its course.’ He gestured to the hololith display, fizzing and wobbling in the air above his head, while a covey of adepts prodded hopefully at the projection equipment. Not for the first time, I had the feeling that most of our audience resented the exchange of information proceeding at what must have seemed like a snail’s pace to them.

‘Then it seems we have little to fear,’ Dysen said, gazing up at the image, which finally steadied. The projected line of the tyranids’ advance passed the Fecundia system altogether and a palpable sense of relief swept across the room as the coin dropped for everyone else.

‘With respect, magos,’ I said, pouncing on the chance to stand up that the intervention offered, and pointing dramatically at the display as I did so, ‘such a conclusion would not only be premature, but potentially fatal.’ The last thing I needed right now was to be dragged back to the main battlefield, which would be all too likely if Zyvan made good on his threat to leave Fecundia to its own devices.

‘How so?’ Dysen asked, clearly out of his depth. At least he was honest enough to admit his own ignorance, instead of blustering it out, and I found my opinion of him rising a little in consequence.

‘Because this is only our best guess at their course, based on the most recent intelligence we have,’ I told him. ‘The Navy and the tau have both

sent scout squadrons to verify it, but until they do, we must work on the assumption that the 'nids could diverge from this trajectory at any time. The population of Fecundia is certainly large enough to tempt them here if they become aware of its presence.'

'And even if the main fleet holds its course,' Zyvan added, 'they can still send out scouts of their own in search of prey. We've observed that kind of thing many times before.'

'Then our ground forces should remain alert,' Kildhar put in, much to my surprise. 'If they become aware of us, we should expect infiltrating organisms to probe our defences.'

'We should,' I agreed. 'You seem remarkably well informed, magos.'

'I am a magos biologis,' she explained, 'and the ways of the tyrannids are not entirely unknown to me.'

'Lucky for us,' I said, blissfully unaware of how wrong I was about that.

'I stand ready to render any assistance you may require,' she assured us.

'Good,' Zyvan said, evidently somewhat mollified by the display of cooperation. 'At least someone here's taking this seriously.'

'I think you'll find we all are,' Dysen droned. 'Even though our priorities may differ in some respects.'

'Our priority is to secure this world,' I said, stepping in quickly to stifle another potential outbreak of discord. 'On that we all agree.' I glanced sideways at El'hassai as I spoke, wondering if that was entirely true in his case. After all, if Fecundia fell, the tau would be able to rampage unopposed across half the Gulf, assuming there was anything left of it after the 'nids had finished. His face was impossible to read, however, although his head inclined in a barely perceptible nod.

'We do,' Dysen said, to my unspoken relief, 'and your advice in the matter will be heeded.'

Which was not the same as being accepted, of course, but it was the best we were going to get at the moment, and once we had thirty thousand heavily armed Guardsmen stationed on the planet, I was pretty sure our view would prevail.

'Have you enough vessels to defend the system from invasion?' Kildhar asked, looking at the hololith with a calculating expression. 'If I read these icons correctly, only a third of them are warships.'

'That's true,' Zyvan admitted, 'the majority are troop carriers. They'll be returning to Coronus as soon as the Imperial Guard units have disembarked.'

But the Navy assures me that we have sufficient firepower among the warships to see off a hive ship or two.'

'Then let us hope the tyranids don't send any more than that,' Dysen said dryly.

Zyvan turned back to the hololith. 'Battlefleet Damocles is fully aware of the threat, and moving to meet it,' he said. 'Three flotillas and a battlegroup are on course to rendezvous at Quadravidia, ready to intercept the main tyranid advance in deep space as soon as its course is reliably determined.'

'Somewhat reassuring,' Kildhar said, in a tone which implied it was anything but. 'If I read the data correctly, however, this rendezvous will not take place until between five and thirty-seven days after the hive fleet's closest approach to Fecundia, depending on the vagaries of the warp currents.'

'Then, as Magos Dysen has so succinctly put it,' I said, shamelessly flattering the venerable tech-priest in the interests of making life easier, 'let us hope the tyranids are considerate enough to attack in manageable numbers.'

'The fleet defending Dr'th'nyr is considerably closer,' El'hassai pointed out, 'and could relieve this system if required.'

'I thought I made our position clear,' Dysen rumbled. 'Unhallowed technologies will not be tolerated in a system dedicated to the worship of the Machine-God.'

Zyvan opened his mouth to say something, his face darkening again, and I stepped in hastily to forestall him.

'I'm sure that the Omnissiah would never allow sufficient harm to befall so devout a world as to make that necessary,' I said, entirely untruthfully. Most of the cogboys ranged around the room nodded smugly.

'Then the matter is unlikely to arise,' El'hassai agreed, his accent dissipating the sarcasm I was certain was there.

'To return to your own point, magos,' I said, addressing Kildhar directly, 'the greatest threat in the short term is likely to come from infiltration, rather than a mass assault. The Navy will, of course, be making continuous auspex sweeps, but tyranid spores are notoriously hard to detect in small numbers. Any advice you could give on enhancing the sensitivity of our instruments would be gratefully received.'

'Of course.' She inclined her head. 'I will make the appropriate arrangements.'

‘The real problem’s the number of other ships in the sky,’ Zyvan said. ‘Every auspex in the fleet is being clogged up with thousands of returns.’<sup>66</sup> We need to close the system to civilian traffic for the duration of the emergency.’

‘Out of the question,’ Dysen said, quite predictably. ‘We’re completely reliant on imported foodstuffs. Our protein synthesis plants can only provide enough nutrients for forty-seven per cent of the population.’

‘Then ration it,’ Zyvan snapped.

‘Not an option, I’m afraid,’ Kildhar said, with a passable attempt at a regretful expression. ‘Nutritional intake for the general populace is precisely calculated to maintain the maximum level of health with the minimum expenditure of resources. Even a five per cent reduction will have noticeably deleterious effects, and reducing daily allowances to a level commensurate with equal distribution would starve everyone to death within a month.’

‘That couldn’t happen,’ I said, to her evident surprise. I smiled, without humour. ‘The riots would have levelled the hives long before that.’

‘A good point,’ she agreed. ‘The tithe workers would undoubtedly respond in an emotional manner.’

‘So we can’t reduce the level of shipping,’ Zyvan said, reluctantly, although that was fine by me; the more ships in orbit, the better my chances of making a run for it if the ’nids really did overwhelm our defences.

‘It would appear not,’ I agreed. ‘So we’ll just have to make the best of it.’ I glanced around the room. The undercurrent of unease and suppressed hostility still crackled in the air like distant lightning. ‘And good luck with that,’ I added quietly to myself, thumbing my palm for good measure.



## NINE

With relations as strained as they were between the expeditionary force and the Adeptus Mechanicus, it was hardly surprising that the bulk of the liaison work fell on me.<sup>67</sup> Zyvan wanted as little to do with the tech-priests as possible, while Dysen made it abundantly clear that the feeling was entirely mutual. I, on the other hand, was supposed by all parties to be a paragon of the Imperial virtues, so both were inclined to listen to me. More inclined than they were to listen to one another, anyway. Accordingly, I spent the next couple of weeks in a complex gavotte of half-truth and misdirection, intended to give the Lord General and Magos Senioris alike the impression that I considered their view of things the more reasonable, and that with a little more flexibility we'd be able to talk the other one round. No doubt Donali would have made a better fist of it, but he was parsecs away and at least I'd had plenty of practice at that sort of thing, after a lifetime of successfully deflecting blame and taking credit I didn't deserve.

The biggest disadvantage of all this, so far as I was concerned, was that I was forced to relocate from the comfort of the flagship to the relatively spartan conditions of the forge world, in order to discharge my responsibilities most effectively. Apart from the full-time job of trying to talk some sense into Dysen, there was the small matter of an Imperial Guard army to deploy and get settled in, with all the friction between them and the local civilians which that normally entailed. Even more so in this case, as there were innumerable areas closed to us on the grounds of doctrine, safety, or sheer bloody-mindedness. At least the Death Korps

seemed happy enough to rough it out in the wilderness, which would have killed more of the other regiments than the enemy, so they were out from underfoot, but the rest, a motley collection from over a dozen worlds,<sup>68</sup> presented me with a constant stream of headaches. More than once I was tempted to pack the whole thing in and recommend our withdrawal, on the grounds that the 'nids were still bearing down on Dr'th'nyr like Jurgen catching sight of an all-you-can-eat smorgasbord, and only the reflection that, if I did, Zyvan would undoubtedly take us off to confront them directly stayed my hand. Besides, we still couldn't be entirely sure that the world was out of danger yet, and going down in history as the man who lost the Gulf would hardly have been the finest of ends to my undeservedly glittering career.

Fortunately the Mechanicus maintained a number of comfortably furnished suites near their inner sanctum for the convenience of visiting Imperial dignitaries, which they seemed to consider me as, so I was less incommoded than I'd feared, but I certainly missed the artistry of Zyvan's personal chef, the bland diet of soylens viridians on which I was obliged to subsist for the most part wreaking predictable havoc on my digestion.<sup>69</sup> Jurgen managed to get hold of some spices from somewhere, which preserved my taste buds from terminal atrophy, but if it hadn't been for my periodic visits to the flagship to liaise with Zyvan in person then I don't suppose I'd have had a decent meal my entire time on Fecundia.

'How's the deployment going?' he asked, having the decency to wait until I'd finished chewing and swallowing. I hadn't been able to time things to take advantage of his hospitality on this visit, more's the pity, but Jurgen, reliable as ever, had trotted off to the nearest galley the moment we'd docked, returning with the welcome booty of hot salt grox baps and a steaming mug of recaff, which I'd seized with gratitude.

'No worse than we'd expected,' I replied, alternating bites at the food with the conversation as we made our way through the familiar bustle of the command centre. An image of Fecundia was rotating gently in the hololith, looking more like a giant canker than ever, speckled with icons showing our current state of readiness. Far too few were accompanied by the fully operational rune than I liked, and I made no bones about saying so, certain that Zyvan would share that opinion. 'But I'd be a lot happier if we had more units in position by now.'

'So would I,' the Lord General agreed. He looked at the faintly translucent

image with a grimace of distaste. 'At least we've got the main habs fortified.'

'Now I've managed to persuade Dysen to go along with it,' I said, seeing no harm in reminding him of how hard I'd been working down there. 'He wanted to secure the production facilities first.'

'No doubt,' Zyvan said, accepting the mug of recaff Jurgen had procured for him as well with a nod of thanks, and the most barely perceptible of flinches. 'How did you persuade him?'

'By pointing out that he wouldn't be able to produce anything at all if the 'nids ate his workforce,' I said. In fact it had been Kildhar who'd first seen the logic of that, and helped to talk him round, but as she wasn't here to dispute the point I didn't think it was worth confusing matters by saying so.

'Quite.' Zyvan took a quick slurp of the warm, bitter drink, and turned back to the hololith. 'Not that we need his permission to do anything we damn well like.' Which was technically true now most of our guns were planetside, if you believed force of arms could win any argument. But if it came to that, the machine-spirits of Fecundia would be certain to take the side of the affronted tech-priests, which would hardly make our job any easier.

'Nevertheless, it's probably better to keep the cogboys happy for as long as we can,' I said. If war really came, hard choices would have to be made about who and what could be saved, and I knew in my bones that our differing priorities would make that all the harder, particularly if old grievances were still simmering away.

Zyvan sighed. 'You're right. Glad that's your problem, though.'

'I thought you would be,' I said, and he smiled for the first time since my arrival.

'Our main weak spot's the wilderness,' he said, studying the slowly rotating globe. 'We can dig in to defend the hives, but nothing can last out in the open for long. For all we know the 'nids could have a beachhead out there already, and we'd never even know it.'

'Until they massed for an attack,' I agreed, liking the idea no more than he did. The hellish conditions on the surface wouldn't worry the tyranids at all, the ones who couldn't burrow under it simply growing thicker armour to protect themselves. 'Trouble is, we don't have much that can operate effectively in those conditions, so any long-range recon is right out.' I indicated the few icons outside the fortress-like walls of the hives. 'The



Death Korps are forming an extended picket line, backed up by whatever armour we can get out there, but our tanks and carriers can only run for a few hours before coming in again.'

'Why?' Zyvan asked, and I shrugged.

'Ash. Keeps getting into the tracks and engines, whatever the cogboys rig up to try and filter it. Every time one of our vehicles goes out, it needs stripping down completely as soon as it gets back, or it'll seize up solid.'

'I can see why you want to keep Dysen sweet,' Zyvan conceded. 'What about the skitarii?'

'Patrolling too,' I said, indicating their icons. The Mechanicus troopers were augmented enough to survive out there too, if not exactly thrive, and were mounting periodic sorties from the hive, although I strongly suspected that was as much to keep an eye on the Death Korps as it was to keep a lookout for tyranids. 'They're meant to be liaising, but so far they've stuck to their zones and we've stuck to ours, so we haven't had a major conflict of interest. If the 'nids attack, though, they're just as likely to go their own way. Best not to formulate any strategy which relies on their co-operation.'

Zyvan snorted, and took another slug of recaff. 'I'd worked that out for myself,' he told me, to my complete lack of surprise. 'It's worse than having a Sororitas contingent to work around.'<sup>70</sup>

'But with fewer hymns,' I said, eliciting the second smile of the day, before returning to the topic at hand. I studied the necrotic globe as dispassionately as I could. Despite our best efforts, there were still huge swathes of it across which we were all but blind. 'It seems to me that we're pretty much reliant on orbital reconnaissance.'

'We are,' Zyvan confirmed. 'The Navy's scanning the surface for tyranid biosigns, so far as they can through the dust storms, as well as keeping a watch for any incoming spores. Nothing so far, but it doesn't mean they're not there.'

'I thought Kildhar was supposed to be tweaking the auspexes,' I said. 'Any luck with that?'

'A little,' a new voice put in, and the magos biologis herself crawled out from behind a sensorium suite cluttering up the far corner of the room. Zyvan had evidently forgotten her presence there, judging by his expression, mentally running back through our conversation in the hope that neither of us had said anything too indiscreet. If she had overheard us, she showed no sign of irritation or embarrassment, but then tech-priests seldom

did, so it was hard to be sure. No point worrying about it that I could see, though, so I simply shrugged. 'We've installed some new filters,' she went on, 'which should refine the data, and help eliminate false positives. We don't want to go to high alert and turn out the skitarii only to find ourselves chasing an ambull colony when they get there, do we?'

'There are ambull down there?' I asked, astonished at the idea that the polluted wasteland could sustain any life at all, let alone the huge, aggressive burrowers.

Kildhar nodded. 'An entire ecosystem, in fact. My title is far from honorary, I can assure you.'

'I'm sure it's not,' I said. 'I was just wondering if there's any chance of a steak when we get back.'

'It's possible, I suppose,' Kildhar said, looking faintly puzzled. 'Some of the surface workers hunt them if the opportunity arises, but the consumption of animal tissue is a singularly inefficient way of ingesting nutrient.' She looked disparagingly at the remains of the bap in my hand. 'Soylens viridiens is far more convenient, and provides everything necessary for continuing good health.'

'Except flavour,' I said feelingly. 'And texture.' My mouth flooded with saliva at the thought of a sizzling chunk of dead flesh.

'Oh.' Kildhar looked more baffled than ever. 'Those.'

'I'll see what I can do, sir,' Jurgen said, with quiet confidence, and my spirits rose at the prospect of a proper meal at last. My aide's talent for scrounging bordered on the preternatural, and I was certain that if ambull steak was to be had anywhere in the hive, he'd find it, even if it meant bagging the brute himself.

Then another, more disquieting thought struck, and I turned back to the tech-priest. 'If there's an ecosystem, that means the 'nids can find prey if they get through. They'll be able to build up their strength far quicker than we bargained for.'

'That would be the case,' Kildhar admitted. 'If they get through. We'll just have to make certain they don't.'

Easier said than done, if you asked me, but verbalising the thought wouldn't get us very far, so I just trotted out some platitudes about us all working together to ensure that, and left her to it, moving further out of earshot as I resumed my conversation with the Lord General. 'Any news from the scout squadrons?' I asked, and Zyvan shook his head, his

expression grave.

‘Nothing yet,’ he said, ‘but the closer they are to the hive fleet, the deeper in its warp shadow they are. Their astropaths won’t be able to send anything until they clear it.’

‘If they ever do,’ I said, the image of the tau explorators’ last moments rising up vividly in my mind’s eye.

Zyvan nodded, clearly thinking the same thing. ‘If they do swing this way, we’ll get very little warning. If any.’

‘Then we’d better hope she knows what she’s doing,’ I said, with a glance at Kildhar, who was back at work by now, poking hopefully at something in the sensorium with her mechadendrites. It responded with a loud pop and the flash of an electrical discharge.

‘Indeed,’ Zyvan agreed, making the sign of the aquila as he spoke.

The rest of my business with Zyvan took some time, as you’d expect with the collated reports of an entire army to summarise, and, by the time I’d finished, my estimable aide had returned to the galley more than once. At last, though, we said our farewells, and plodded back to the hangar bay, where an unpleasant surprise awaited us.

‘What do you mean, there are no shuttles?’ I demanded, more in astonishment than in anger. The Naval non-com<sup>71</sup> who’d broken the news stepped back a pace, and swallowed nervously.

‘The one you came in on’s been reassigned, sir. Medevac. Priority one.’

I felt a chill run down my spine. ‘I was unaware that any of our units were in combat,’ I said, wondering if the ’nids had managed to sneak in under our noses, in spite of Kildhar’s best efforts with soldering irons, coding patches, and incense burners. Then another, more ominous thought struck: a friendly fire incident between the Guardsmen and skitarii would complicate things hideously, if I could even begin to smooth matters over at all...

‘They aren’t, sir,’ the matelot made haste to assure me, much to my relief. ‘It was an industrial accident, in the Rusthill munition works. The Lord General felt it would be good for morale if we were seen to be helping out.’

‘It would,’ I agreed. The injured workers and their colleagues would appreciate the efforts made on their behalf and want to repay the debt by keeping us well supplied, the Mechanicus would get their precious plant working again that little bit faster, and the experience of working together would help to overcome the lingering animosity which was continuing to

make my job more difficult than it needed to be. It was a good call, and one I'd probably have made myself in Zyvan's shoes. On the other hand... 'How long until a shuttle becomes available?'

'I couldn't say, sir,' the sailor told me, visibly relieved not to be shot on the spot for giving me the bad news. 'Some time, though, be my guess. Sounds like a real mess down there.'

'What about that one?' Jurgen asked, pointing a grubby finger in the vague direction of a crimson Aquila, picked out in gold around the feather plates, and bearing a silver cogwheel on its fuselage.

'That would be mine,' Kildhar said, striding through the airlock. 'For the exclusive use of the Adeptus Mechanicus.' She favoured us with a friendly nod as she spoke, the stiffness of her neck mute testament to the unfamiliarity of the gesture. She could have used some lessons from El'hassai in mimicking normal human responses, but at least she made the effort. 'I'm surprised to find you still aboard, commissar.'

'And I you,' I replied, already wondering if I could turn this to my advantage. There would surely be room for a couple of extra passengers aboard the shuttle, since she seemed to be alone. 'My consultations with the Lord General took a good deal of time.'

'As did my adjustments to the sensoria.' If she was surprised to find Jurgen and I falling into step with her, she gave no sign of it. 'But I believe they will prove adequate to the task.'

'I'm pleased to hear it,' I said. 'Some excellent news to pass on to the Magos Senioris when I see him.' I glanced at my chronograph, exaggerating the movement just sufficiently to make sure it was noticed. 'Which was supposed to be within the hour.'

'I am sure you will be able to obtain transportation soon,' Kildhar said, pausing at the foot of the boarding ramp, and pointedly refusing to take the hint.

'We could come with you,' Jurgen said, with characteristic bluntness. Subtlety was just something that happened to other people so far as he was concerned. 'If that would be convenient, miss,' he added, with a belated attempt at politeness.

'I'm afraid that would be impossible,' Kildhar said, doing her best to sound as though she meant it. 'My pilot servitor has pre-programmed flight instructions, which cannot be overridden. Otherwise this vessel would also be assisting in the current crisis.'

‘A simple hop to the surface will do us fine,’ I persisted. ‘We can return to the spire from any of the pads in the hive.’

‘Regrettably, I will not be landing within the hive itself,’ Kildhar said, with the air of a regicide player successfully assassinating my king. ‘And my destination is closed to outsiders.’

‘I see,’ I said, my curiosity piqued, although if I’d known what that was going to lead to, I’d have told it to sit down and shut up. At the time, though, I just felt that anything the Mechanicus didn’t want us to know about was probably something we needed to, and the chance to uncover it was too good to miss. It was bad enough trying to defend this miserable clinker as it was, without our allies springing any unpleasant surprises at the worst possible moment. ‘I’m sure Magos Dysen will appreciate you weren’t able to help us keep our appointment with him. And the Lord General certainly won’t object to him being kept out of the loop for a while longer.’

A faint frown of uncertainty began lapping around the immobile, metallic parts of Kildhar’s face, while she worked it out. ‘Wait here a moment,’ she said at last, disappearing inside the shuttle. A few seconds later she appeared in the unoccupied upper cupola, partially obscured by the bands of metal holding the armourglass panels in place, and busied herself with a vox-unit. Whether by accident or design, she kept her back to us, so I wasn’t able to glean the substance of the conversation by attempting to lip read, although at that distance I probably wouldn’t have been able to make out much in any case.<sup>72</sup>

After a few moments of discussion, accompanied by a good deal of emphatic arm waving, she returned, and beckoned us aboard the Aquila. ‘Under the circumstances,’ she said, ‘and since it’s you, a majority of the senior magi are prepared to allow you limited access to the facility.’

‘Jolly good of them,’ I said, following her up the ramp. Although, had I known what awaited us on the surface, I would have walked back to Fecundia, rather than set foot on the blasted shuttle.



## TEN

Our descent was uneventful, and as uncomfortable as I'd anticipated. True to form, the Mechanicus had apparently decided that refinements like seat padding were unnecessary, and probably inefficient to boot, so we found ourselves perching on a welded metal bench, above which safety harnesses had been fastened at what seemed to me to be the most inconvenient height rational analysis could have determined.

There was little attempt at conversation from any of us. Our voices would have had to be raised to be heard over the shriek of the engines in any case, soundproofing being another refinement the tech-priests apparently considered redundant.<sup>73</sup> Jurgen had lapsed into his usual airsickness-induced torpor as soon as we hit the atmosphere, while Kildhar maintained a thoughtful silence, her eyes unfocused,<sup>74</sup> and I was as preoccupied as ever, wondering if I was doing the right thing. Something about the tech-priest's words in the hangar bay disturbed me, and I replayed them in my mind obsessively.

'Since it's you,' she'd said. At the time I'd taken that purely as a reference to my reputation, and the toehold in the Mechanicus camp my position as Dysen and Zyven's go-between had afforded me, but on reflection there had been something about the cadence of her voice which had hinted at something else. And she seemed to have arranged clearance for me to visit this shrine remarkably quickly, given how hidebound the disciples of the Omnissiah generally were by tradition and precedent, and how jealously they guarded their secrets.

‘Where are we going, exactly?’ I asked, as her eyes finally focused again. By this time we were skimming across one of the ash wastes, a patch of blight downwind from the furnaces of the south-western manufactory zone, which seemed to stretch halfway to the horizon. Bilious brown and yellow clouds scudded across its surface, whorled into phantom shapes by the slipstream of our passage: noxious effusions from the heart of the slowly cooling embers of industry, whose toxic touch would suffocate or burn the unwary to death in a matter of moments. Offhand, I could think of few places I’d ever been which looked so singularly uninviting.

‘Regio Quinquaginta Unus,’ she replied. ‘One of our most sacred shrines. Few outside our order are even aware of its existence.’

‘Then I’m honoured to be made an exception,’ I said, in my most diplomatic tone.

‘What’s so special about it?’ Jurgen asked, roused from his silent suffering by the prospect of being back on the ground before long, and cutting directly to the heart of the matter as he so often did.

Kildhar seemed taken aback by the directness of the question, and pondered a moment before making a reply. ‘It’s a repository,’ she said at last. ‘Of knowledge so ancient its origins are lost to us. And a sanctuary, for those dedicated to its recovery and application.’

‘You’re talking about archeotech, aren’t you?’ I said, and the tech-priest nodded. She seemed to be getting better at it, I noted absently, unless it was just that she meant it this time.

‘Recovered from a dozen places across the sector,’ she told me reverently, ‘and brought here for preservation and study.’

‘I can appreciate why you would want to keep that confidential,’ I said, suppressing a shudder. I’d come across a few revenant artefacts myself over the decades, and the consequences had never been good. Memories of dodging genestealers in the bowels of a space hulk jostled with those of the lunatic fervour in Killian’s eyes as he tried to convince me that dragging the galaxy into damnation was the best way to save it, and of the relentless advance of the gleaming metal killers in the labyrinth of tunnels beneath Interitus Prime. ‘That kind of knowledge can attract the wrong kind of attention.’

‘Then we must rely on your discretion,’ she said.

‘I’m honoured that you think you can,’ I said, truthfully enough, already beginning to compose an urgently worded dispatch to Amberley in my head

as I spoke.<sup>75</sup> For all I knew the Inquisition was already perfectly aware of this stockpile of primordial junk, but it never hurt to spread the word a little further, especially if one of the inquisitors in the know happened to be a dangerous loon,<sup>76</sup> like the late and unlamented Killian.

There was little time for further conversation after that, as the Aquila banked sharply and the shrine itself came into view. A hexagonal block of rockcrete rose up out of the dark grey drifts beneath us, looking not unlike one of the thousands of defensive bunkers I'd observed, cowered in, or tried to avoid assaulting in the course of my long and inglorious career, until the profusion of vox antennae, heat sinks, and substructures encrusting its surface allowed me to get some sense of scale. It was at least two hundred metres high, and twice that across. As we rose above it, the outline of a blessed cogwheel became visible, inlaid into the roof, and encircling the centre of it, running just inside the narrowest portions of the hexagon. In the very centre the motif was repeated, enclosing a raised landing pad, which at the moment appeared to be unoccupied.

'I can't see any guards,' Jurgen said, turning in his seat to get a better view, and almost throttling himself with the misaligned crash webbing.

'I'm sure there must be some,' I said, with a quizzical glance at our hostess. 'Skitarii?'

'Three contubernia are stationed here at all times,' she told me, in a faintly evasive manner.

'Three squads,' I said thoughtfully, translating the term into its Imperial Guard equivalent.<sup>77</sup> 'Should be enough for an installation this size.'

'It's proved adequate so far,' Kildhar assured me. The Aquila was on its final approach now, its landing jets flaring, and I felt the sudden surge of acceleration against my spine as it rose a little to position itself above the centre of the pad. Then the engines powered down, and the landing skids ground against the rockcrete. 'And, of course, we take other precautions.' There was a hint of a smile hovering round her lips, despite her best efforts to retain the expressionless face expected of a tech-priest; clearly she was expecting me to ask what.

'I'd expect nothing less,' I said, as the whine of our engines died away, refusing to play the game. If I did ask, she'd just tell me I didn't have the right clearance, subtly underlining who was really in charge here, whereas if I affected complete indifference there was every chance she might let something slip in an attempt to needle me into a response. Before she had



the chance to try, though, the Aquila lurched again, prompting a questioning look from my aide.

‘We’re not about to take off again, are we?’ he asked, in tones of resigned dread.

I shook my head. ‘The engines have powered down,’ I pointed out, beginning to wonder why the pilot hadn’t dropped the ramp already. But even as I spoke, the whole shuttle shuddered for a second time, and began to descend slowly through the surface of the roof. The thick raft of rockcrete, and the supporting girderwork, rose smoothly past the viewport, and I found myself looking down into a hangar not dissimilar to the one from which we’d so recently departed. Being part of a Mechanicus shrine rather than a warship, however, the metal walls were bright and reflective instead of drab and stained, and the ground crews scurrying towards us wore the red robes of engineers instead of void suits.

‘I would recommend remaining seated,’ Kildhar said, a trifle smugly, as I half rose to catch a glimpse of a thick roof sliding closed above us. Clearly, since it was showing so openly, she was finding our surprise a source of considerable amusement. The elevator platform stopped moving, with a faint jerk, and I wavered a moment before regaining my balance.

‘A neat trick,’ I allowed, as a small tractor scuttled across the hangar to attach itself to our shuttle’s nose, and began dragging us away into a corner<sup>78</sup> next to a refuelling point.

‘We have plenty more,’ Kildhar assured me, as the Aquila stopped moving at last, and the boarding ramp began to descend.

Jurgen and I walked down the ramp cautiously, getting our first good look at our surroundings as we did so, Kildhar following a pace or two behind. The air in the cavernous hangar was tainted with the sulphurous stench of the outside atmosphere, but it seemed perfectly breathable. Indeed, within a matter of moments I barely noticed the residual smell at all.<sup>79</sup> ‘That was a good deal more comfortable than our first arrival,’ I remarked, with rather less tact than I might have employed, but Kildhar took the intended meaning without offence.

‘Direct exposure to the environment this far from the hive can be severely deleterious, even to the augmented,’ she said. ‘And, of course, many of the artefacts arrive here in an extremely fragile state. It’s far better to offload them where they can be properly protected.’

‘Quite right too,’ I agreed. ‘And from the hangar, they go where?’

‘That depends.’ Kildhar was leading the way towards a wide, high portal, following the marks made on the floor by innumerable trolley wheels. Clearly some of the specimens they dealt with were of a considerable size, judging by the dimensions of the tunnel beyond. ‘We have a wide range of analyticae here, capable of all kinds of measurement and experimentation.’

‘Just so long as they know what they’re doing,’ Jurgen muttered to me, in a voice he fondly imagined was inaudible.

‘We do,’ Kildhar assured us, the breeziness of her manner enough to show that she believed that, even if I didn’t. She led the way deeper into the massive building at a brisk pace, changing direction so often that I was forced to conclude she was deliberately trying to confuse us. My innate affinity for complex tunnel systems was proving as reliable as ever, though, and I was sure I’d be able to find my way back to the hangar if I had to. ‘It’s not much further now.’

‘I’m pleased to hear it,’ I said, with another ostentatious glance at my chronograph. ‘But I’m afraid I’m already late for my meeting with Magos Dysen. Perhaps if you could take us to a vox?’

‘That won’t be necessary,’ Kildhar said, a trifle smugly. ‘Alternative arrangements have been made.’ She paused, in front of a doorway which seemed rather larger than it needed to be. ‘We don’t have guest quarters as such, but we do have occasional visitors. If you care to wait in here, the Magos Senioris will be with you within the hour.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, completely wrong-footed, and determined not to show it. Kildhar tapped out a complicated access code on a keypad near the door, which obligingly slid open, with a faint squeal of unlubricated runners.

The room beyond was as spartan as I’d come to expect of our hosts’ tastes, containing little beyond an array of data lecterns, a polished steel conference table with devotional icons of machine parts chased in bronze, and an array of those hideously uncomfortable seats. Several of them seemed far larger, and more robust, than the others, and I gave them a curious glance. Come to that, a few of the lecterns seemed set unusually high as well, so much so that I wouldn’t have been able to use the keyboards without standing on tiptoe. That reminded me of something, but, as is always the way when you try to bring an elusive memory into focus, the harder I tried, the further it slipped from my conscious mind.

‘Any idea what this is, sir?’ Jurgen asked, peering at one of the curiously-

shaped pieces of metallic detritus scattered around the room on finely-wrought display stands.

‘None whatsoever,’ I shrugged, ambling over to take a look at it. A few corroded wires protruded from the casing, their bright ends showing where power feeds or instrumentation had been clipped to them during the examination process. ‘But if it’s stuck in a case in here, it’s either been wrung dry or written off.’ I glanced at Kildhar, who looked faintly reproving.

‘Neither,’ she said, a little primly. ‘The Omnissiah’s works can never be fully apprehended, nor casually discarded.’ Then her expression softened a little. ‘But you are substantially correct. This artefact has been thoroughly examined, and no lines of enquiry remain open at this time which seem likely to yield further knowledge.’

Intrigued, I leaned a little closer, and began to read the inscription engraved on the miniscule metal plate riveted to the stand, in letters so small I could barely make them out. ‘Atmospheric sampler, M28...’ At which I broke off, impressed in spite of myself by the staggering antiquity of the thing. ‘M28,’ I resumed, trying to ignore Kildhar’s expression, which on a face less threaded with metal I would only have been able to describe as smug, ‘recovered 854935.M41, Serendipita system...’ Then the penny dropped, and I turned back to the tech-priest, reeling with shock. ‘This is from the *Spawn of Damnation*!’

‘Quite so,’ she agreed, as if that was the most natural thing in the galaxy. ‘Most of the artefacts recovered from the hulk have been brought here for safekeeping.’ Which made a bizarre kind of sense, if you thought about it. Fecundia was the nearest forge world to Serendipita, stuffed to the gills with tech-priests, and with the right facilities to analyse the loot properly.

Which also explained why I’d been granted access to the place. If it hadn’t been for me, setting the orks and genestealers aboard the derelict at one another’s throats, they’d never have got half so much from it before it disappeared back into the warp. Assuming it had, for you never could tell with space hulks, whose movements were as capricious as the warp currents they drifted on. ‘Is it still there?’ I asked, unable to resist the question.

‘No.’ Kildhar sounded truly regretful at this, the first real emotion I’d heard seeping into her voice. ‘It disappeared back into the warp in 948, and hasn’t been sighted since. Efforts were initially made to track it, but were unsuccessful. In recent years, the Reclaimers have had other calls on their

attention.'

'Haven't we all,' I said feelingly. Between the tau and the tyranids, the Imperium was coming under greater pressure in the Eastern Arm than it had done in over a millennium, and none of its other foes had been particularly quiet either. I had no doubt that the Space Marine Chapter I'd been foolish enough to board the derelict alongside would find plenty to keep them amused, even without a vast, three-dimensional labyrinth stuffed with lethal creatures to loot.

'Indeed so.' Kildhar hovered for a moment on the threshold. 'And a great deal is currently demanding mine. I trust your consultation with the Magos Senioris will prove productive.' And with that she withdrew, the door grinding closed behind her.

'Typical,' Jurgen said, collapsing onto the nearest chair, and pulling a porno slate from his pocket to help pass the time. 'Not even the offer of a mug of recaff.'

'She's probably already eaten this month,' I said sourly, strolling along the length of the room. There were about half a dozen other exhibits ranged about it, all but one from the *Spawn of Damnation*, and all equally incomprehensible to me as to their age and purpose.

Jurgen suspended his perusal of anatomically improbable artistic engravings, and glanced in my direction. 'Lucky I brought a flask of tanna along, then. If you feel you could do with one.'

'Most definitely,' I agreed, accepting the warm drink gratefully. But before I could taste more than a mouthful, a strident alarm began to blare. 'Emperor's bowels, now what!'

Abandoning the steaming flask, I hurried towards the door, anticipating the worst, which in my experience is always the way to bet. I tugged at the handle, but it refused to slide open, and I looked at the keypad in consternation. Kildhar had punched in the number so rapidly it would have been impossible to follow the blur of her augmetic fingers, even if I'd been paying attention, which, I'm bound to admit, I hadn't.

'Allow me, sir,' Jurgen said, raising his lasgun and firing a couple of quick rounds into the mechanism before I could stop him. Too late to worry about how our hosts would react to that now, so I simply seized the handle, and tugged again. 'Oh, nads'.

'Couldn't have put it better myself,' I agreed, with rather more asperity than I'd intended. With the locking mechanism destroyed, we were trapped,

unable even to discover what had so stirred up the tech-priests. I strained my ears, trying to discern anything which might give us a clue, and hoping to the Throne it wasn't going to be the premonitory rumblings of some titanic explosion that was about to immolate us all. But the walls were thick, lined in metal, and all I could hear was the humming of the circulators. Which sparked another idea. 'Can you see anything that looks like an air vent?' With our only exit immovably jammed, I was damned if I was going to just sit around waiting for the bang.

'Over here, sir,' Jurgen called, after a moment of searching, his voice raised to be heard over the harsh bleating of the alarm. He pointed helpfully to a grille near the floor, about twenty centimetres by ten.

'Well done,' I encouraged him, feeling I owed him that much for my earlier moment of pettishness, 'but I was hoping for something a bit larger.'

Jurgen shook his head. 'They're all the same, I'm afraid, sir.'

'Then we'll just have to improvise,' I said, drawing my chainsword, thumbing the speed selector up to maximum. It wouldn't be the first time I'd carved my way through a wall or a door with it, although I'd seldom had to use it on anything as robust as the ones here looked. 'Watch out for sparks.'

But before I could make my first attack, the slab of metal bulged as something struck it hard from the other side, jarring it free of its runners. Jurgen and I exchanged an uneasy glance, and then stepped back, raising our weapons. My free hand fell to the laspistol holstered at my side, but before I could draw it, another blow shivered the door, and a quartet of incredibly sharp talons punctured their way through. As I watched, momentarily paralysed in disbelieving horror, the hand behind them clenched into a fist, ripping a hole the size of my head in the thick steel plate.

Jurgen opened fire at once, directing a burst of las-bolts through the aperture, and the creature beyond recoiled for a moment before pressing its attack. Then a second set of talons punctured the metal as though it were cardboard, slashing down to open a jagged rent, while the first ripped a diagonal tear across to join it. I drew my laspistol as a second pair of hands, tipped with smaller claws and bearing an extra finger apiece, took a firm hold of the ragged barrier, before yanking it free of the runners and tossing it aside.

From the moment the first set of talons had burst through the door I'd had

a queasy feeling that I knew what manner of beast was on the other side, and now I knew I was right. I just had the merest fraction of a second to register the fact, before Jurgen's and my fingers tightened on our triggers, and a purestrain genestealer, its jaws agape, charged straight down the barrels of our guns.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## ELEVEN

Our first volley checked the hideous creature's rush and it faltered, staggering under the multiple impacts of Jurgen's burst of automatic fire, to which my brief flurry of additional las-bolts added very little if I'm honest. Cauterised craters exploded across its thorax, raising a fine spray of ichor and pulverised chitin, which we were close enough to see wafting around its body like mist rising from an early morning swamp. It recovered fast though, jaws snapping, and leapt forwards again leaking rancid fluids through its cracked carapace, but Jurgen and I were no longer there, having jumped aside in opposite directions. It turned to follow me, both of the arms on its left side reaching out, in the apparent hope of snaring me in its lower hand while it dissected me with the scalpel-sharp talons of the upper.

I was ready for it, however, having faced genestealers before, and ducked under the grabbing hand, slashing upwards with the chainsword. Its teeth whined for a moment as they bit into the creature's tough outer shell, then came free, lopping off the extended limb like a diseased tree branch before slicing through its underbelly. A gush of offal erupted from it, making a ghastly mess of my greatcoat, and splattered on the floor at our feet. Tough and tenacious as the creature was, it couldn't last long in that condition, and it lunged forwards, apparently intent on making one last attack on Jurgen as a final act of revenge. Before it could reach him it slipped in its own entrails and crashed into the table, denting it and sending several of the hideously uncomfortable chairs surrounding it flying with a clatter which resonated loudly in the metal-lined room. Incredibly, despite the battering it had

taken, the monstrosity still stirred feebly, trying to rise, and I swung my chainsword, decapitating it though if I was any judge, it had expired altogether an instant before the blade actually hit.

‘Well, that got the door open,’ Jurgen said, determined to look on the bright side, and I nodded grimly.

‘We know what all the fuss is about, too,’ I agreed, raising my voice above the blaring of the alarms, which echoed twice as loudly now they were no longer muffled by the intervening door. ‘The ’nids have arrived.’ I tapped the comm-bead in my ear, hoping for a tactical update, but I could hear nothing on any of the Imperial Guard channels; none of the vox-units in the vicinity were tuned to them, and all I could raise was incomprehensible gibberish. We’d just have to hope that it was an isolated incursion, rather than the full-scale invasion my panicked imagination persisted in picturing. ‘Come on. We need to find out what the hell’s going on.’

Which turned out to be blind panic, so far as I could see, the corridor outside choked with red-robed acolytes scurrying in every direction, warbling at one another in their incomprehensible dialect. The sight of Jurgen and me, armed and splattered with chunks of diced genestealer, didn’t exactly help their equanimity, and I soon gave up trying to stop one and ask for information. Most just gibbered for a moment, pointing back the way they’d come, and scuttled off again, as fast as their legs (or in some cases wheels, grav plates, or springs) would carry them. As they seemed to be passing down the corridor in both directions, I couldn’t even follow my instinctive response at times like this, and get as far away from wherever the greatest danger seemed to be as quickly as possible.

‘Back to the hangar, sir?’ Jurgen asked, as the crowd cleared a little, and I nodded. I didn’t have a clue where anything else was in this labyrinth, and if we struck out at random we could wander around it indefinitely, or at least until the tyranids caught up with us. We might be able to commandeer a shuttle there, or at least find a parked one with a vox I could use to get back in touch with Zyvan and find out just how much trouble we were in.

‘Seems like our best option,’ I agreed, turning to lead the way, but before I could take more than a handful of steps in that direction, a flurry of motion at the end of the corridor checked my stride. Three more ’stealers had loped into view, slashing and tearing at any tech-priests still laggardly enough to be in the way. A welter of blood and lubricants marked their progress, sullyng the floor beneath their talons and bespattering the walls in their



wake. Few of their victims moved after they passed by, although a couple continued to twitch in a flurry of electrical sparks, their internal power cells earthing through the metallic surface they were sprawled across.

There was no need to verbalise my sudden change of plan, Jurgen and I had fought side by side far too long and often for that. Pausing only to unleash a flurry of las-bolts in the vain hope of slowing them a little, we turned and ran, hoping desperately that something would present itself in the handful of seconds we had before the creatures caught up with us.

‘Knew I should have brought the melta,’ Jurgen grumbled, as the sinister rattle of talon on metal became audible even over the shrilling of the alarm. If they were close enough to hear in spite of all that racket they must have been more or less on top of us already, and I didn’t dare to look back. Turning to glance over my shoulder would cost only a fraction of a second’s lead, but even that was liable to prove fatal. Besides, I didn’t want the last thing I saw to be a genestealer’s gullet.

‘Would have been handy,’ I agreed, although he could hardly be blamed for having left his favourite toy behind. The bulky weapon wasn’t exactly ideal for lugging around the corridors of a starship, and we’d had no warning of the tyranid attack, so there’d been no reason to think we’d need it. Then another thought struck me. ‘Got any grenades?’ He generally kept a couple about his person, even when we were some distance from the front, a habit I’d been grateful for on several occasions in the past.

‘Can’t use ’em,’ he said regretfully. ‘Too many civilians about.’ There were indeed a number of tech-priests still cluttering up the corridor, although their fondness for augmetics had enabled the majority to open up an impressive lead, and, judging by the noises behind me, the ones who hadn’t were getting fewer by the second.

‘Krak then,’ I said, rather less concerned about collateral damage to cogboys than the realisation that a frag charge going off close enough to incommode the ’stealers would probably shred Jurgen and I into the bargain.

‘Got one of those,’ my aide confirmed, rummaging in one of his collection of equipment pouches, and priming the grenade he produced deftly with his teeth. He lobbed it back over his shoulder without breaking stride. ‘Can’t see what good it’ll do, though.’

‘Neither can I,’ I admitted, ‘but it can hardly hurt now.’ The floor shook as the anti-armour charge went off, and something small, sharp and metallic

pinged off the wall next to my ear. We must have damaged an electrical circuit somewhere, because the shrieking siren suddenly went quiet, leaving my ears ringing with the absence of noise. The scuttling behind us seemed to have diminished too, and I decided to risk a glance back after all.

The desperate stratagem seemed to have bought us a little time, at least. The high-explosive charge had blown a hole in the metal floor, exposing a tangle of pipework and cabling from which some kind of vapour was rising in a cloud. The 'stealers seemed dazed by the explosion, but I couldn't count on that happy circumstance continuing for long.

'That gave 'em something to think about,' Jurgen said, sending another hail of las-bolts down the corridor as he spoke. Given the choice I'd simply have put as much distance between the hideous creatures and myself as possible, but we did have an audience of cowed tech-priests to think about, most of whom looked even more dazed than the genestealers. They were milling around and chirruping to one another, as if they couldn't believe the mess we'd just made of their nice clean corridor, but under the circumstances felt it best not to object and I had no doubt that at least a few of them had pictcoders built into their augmetic eyes. The last thing I needed was images of Cain the Hero acting like the poltroon I actually am making the rounds, especially if I needed my undeserved reputation to help me make a run for it later. So I cracked off a couple of shots myself and flourished the chainsword, taking up a defensive stance as if I meant to protect the survivors from a renewed charge.

'Get to safety,' I told them, with the best show of concern I could feign, glancing back over my shoulder. I was about to add a couple of rote platitudes, in the interests of hurrying them up, when the vapour cloud ignited, engulfing the 'stealers in a fireball and sending a pressure wave down the passageway which knocked me sprawling to the chill metal floor.

I staggered back to my feet, still trying to grasp this unexpected turn of events. Clearly, whatever was in the pipe had been flammable, although whether it had been ignited by one of our las-rounds or a spark from the damaged wiring was impossible to guess. I had little time to ponder the matter, however, as at that point a blazing genestealer burst from the inferno and plunged blindly towards me, although whether it was impelled by the brood mind, or simply crazed with agony, I couldn't tell. I fired at it by reflex, leaping aside at the last possible minute and getting a lucky strike in with the chainsword, which severed the ligaments in its legs. Crippled, it

crashed to the floor, where it rolled around, flailing and giving me an anxious few moments avoiding its teeth and claws, before finally accepting the fact that it was dead.

‘The other two have had it as well,’ Jurgen told me, trotting back from a quick trip to check. ‘Lucky that pipe exploded, or it could have been nasty.’

‘It could indeed,’ I said, giving up trying to count the number of slaughtered tech-priests in the corridor beyond the pall of smoke. Throne knows I had little enough in common with cogboys, and even less patience on occasion, but I still found the sight depressing, probably because it could so easily have been me lying there with my innards on display.

‘The Ommissiah truly processes your data,’ an awestruck tech-priest of indeterminate gender<sup>80</sup> told me, making the sign of the cogwheel.

‘Jolly decent of Him,’ I said, not quite sure how to respond to that. I was still getting nothing intelligible though my comm-bead, but maybe my interlocutor had access to other sources of information. ‘Any idea how many more of those things are loose around here?’ Genestealer broods were usually a lot bigger than the quartet we’d already seen and accounted for.

The cowled head shook, the fire behind us reflecting in the metal face, making it flicker disturbingly in the depths of the robe.

‘Any other infiltrating organisms? Lictors, maybe?’ I don’t mind admitting I quailed inwardly at the prospect, although I kept my feelings from showing on my face with the ease of long practice. Genestealers were bad enough, but the idea of hunting, or, more likely, being hunted by, organisms perfectly adapted to stealth and ambush was far more disturbing.

‘I regret I have no current information,’ metal-face said, making the cogwheel gesture again for no reason that I could see, presumably because they didn’t know what else to do with their fingers. ‘Xenobiological queries should be directed to Magos Kildhar.’

Of course. ‘And do you have any idea where she is?’ I asked, already sure I knew the answer I was going to get.

‘I have no current information in that regard either,’ the tech-priest said, sounding genuinely regretful. ‘Her analyticum is located on level twenty-eight, section three, however. Should you wish to consult her, that would be the most likely place to effect an encounter.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, ‘but my duty now is to report to the Magos Senioris and the Lord General.’ Who ought to know what the hell was going on, if anyone did.

‘The Magos Senioris is due to arrive imminently,’ the tech-priest said, clearly determined to be as helpful as possible. ‘Indeed, he may already have landed.’

‘Then we need to get back to the hangar as quickly as possible,’ I said, seizing the opportunity the Emperor had just dropped in my lap. ‘His protection must be our highest priority.’ And that would be best achieved by getting him back on the shuttle and away from here as quickly as possible, preferably accompanied by me. I glanced back at the fire behind us, still blocking the corridor. ‘If you could suggest an alternative route?’

‘Down that way, first right, second left...’ the tech-priest began, reeling off a list of directions that threatened to go on almost indefinitely. After the first few, I realised that we’d be heading back the way we’d come, or at least close enough to it to rely on my knack of remaining orientated in places like this, and cut them off in full flow.

‘We’ll find it,’ I said confidently, and began double-timing it, Jurgen and his lasgun a reassuring presence at my heels. Now the wretched alarm wasn’t drowning everything else out, I was able to use my ears as well as my eyes. The clatter of our boot soles on the metal floor raised distracting echoes, compounded by the ones created by the number of confused and frightened cogboys scattering out of the way as we ran, but I was pretty sure I couldn’t hear the sinister scrabbling of genestealer claws anywhere behind us. Nevertheless, I kept a sharp look out, darting quick, apprehensive glances into every nook and crevice we passed, paying particular attention to the pipework and ducting depending from the ceiling; the cursed creatures could cling to the sheerest of surfaces, and I’d seen too many of the Reclaimers brought down by ambush from above on our ill-fated foray aboard the *Spawn of Damnation* not to be paranoid about the possibility of falling victim to a similar attack.

‘I thought there were supposed to be skitarii stationed here,’ Jurgen said sourly, hurdling a stray CAT<sup>81</sup> as he did so. ‘What’s keeping them?’

‘I think they’re busy,’ I told him, disentangling the distinctive heavy *crack* of hellgun fire from the overlapping echoes that pursued us. It seemed to be coming from more than one direction, although more than that I couldn’t distinguish, nor, if I’m honest, was I concerned enough to make the effort of doing so. The firing was all sufficiently distant for me to be confident that we weren’t about to stumble into the middle of a skirmish, and that was all I cared about at the moment.

We pelted round the last of the corners on the tech-priest's itinerary, dodging a servitor still plodding about whatever errand it had last been sent on, oblivious to the commotion surrounding it, and I found myself in a corridor I recognised at last.

'This way,' I told Jurgen, my spirits rising, only to have them dashed a moment later. The sound of gunfire was up ahead too, echoing from the direction of the hangar.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## TWELVE

I'd be lying if I told you I didn't hesitate at that moment, but in truth I had no option but to charge ahead regardless. There were too many cogboys cluttering up the corridor for any sign of faltering resolve on my part to go unnoticed and, to compound the issue, I'd said in so many words that I meant to protect Dysen from the genestealers. Whether or not the tech-priest had recorded or transmitted the conversation, it was out there among them, no doubt being passed from one to another in excited snatches. So yet again I was committed to a course of action that ran directly counter to all my instincts, as a glib excuse intended to keep me out of trouble rebounded to bite me on the arse. Besides, getting to the hangar, and through it to safety, meant facing whatever awaited us ahead whether I liked it or not, and at least it sounded as though I'd have some skitarii to hide behind this time, instead of playing 'nid bait on my own.

The wide, high doorway to the hangar was open, and once again my nostrils were assaulted by the sulphurous reek of the outer air, so strong that it even overpowered Jurgen's distinctive odour. That meant Dysen's shuttle must already have arrived, descending on the lift from the landing pad and admitting a tranche of the all but unbreathable outer air along with it.

We'd almost reached the gaping entranceway when a crimson-uniformed skitarii cannoned through it, propelled by the genestealer which was trying to gnaw his face off. Blood and less identifiable fluids were seeping through wide gashes in his body armour from wounds which would have felled a normal man, but he was still fighting fiercely, his heavily augmented body

soaking up the kind of punishment only a Space Marine could normally have withstood. The pair of them rebounded from the opposite wall, leaving a dent in the polished metal surface, and waltzed towards Jurgen and I, so engrossed in their private struggle that they were probably equally oblivious to our presence.

Reacting instinctively, my duellist's reflexes cutting in without conscious thought, I pivoted to avoid the intertwined antagonists and struck at the genestealer's back with my chainsword. The whirling blade cut deep, spraying the damaged wall with fragments of chitin and viscera. Taken completely by surprise, the abominable creature turned and snapped at me, its razor-edged fangs clashing together close enough to have taken my arm off, if I hadn't stepped back to open the distance a little. The beleaguered skitarii rallied, taking advantage of the 'stealer's moment of distraction to smash his forearm into the side of its head, laying it open with the serrated blade inlaid along its length. Partially stunned, the hideous creature loosened its grip on him, raising its neck to strike with its fangs, like a serpent. Seeing my chance I stepped in again, severing its spinal column with a precise horizontal swipe.

Roaring with rage, the fleshly parts of his face engorged and almost as red as his uniform, the skitarii seized both sides of the purestrain's head between his hands and twisted. With a hideous ripping, crunching sound, remarkably similar to that produced by Jurgen and a plate of seafood, the 'stealer's head came clean away from its body.

After regarding his grisly trophy for a moment, the skitarii threw it aside and strode towards me, trampling the body of his fallen foe underfoot as he came. His face was still contorted, even more marginally human than a soldier of the Adeptus Mechanicus normally looked, and I began to feel concerned for my own safety. He was out of his head on 'zerk,<sup>82</sup> or something very like it, and probably in no fit state to distinguish friend from foe, or even care. Then, almost at the last minute, I recognised the patchwork of augmetics encrusting his face.

'Centurion Kyper, report,' I rapped out, in my most commanding manner, pleased to note out of the corner of my eye that Jurgen's lasgun was levelled at him. I hoped he wouldn't have to use it, but if it meant me staying in one piece, I'd let him gun down the skitarii officer in a heartbeat, and worry about the political implications later.

But, to my relief, Kyper's eyes began to clear, a vestige of understanding

returning to them almost at once.

‘Commissar Cain,’ he grated out. ‘You are welcome. Plenty of ’stealers still to kill.’ The fires of drug-induced frenzy began to blaze up in him again and he turned back towards the fray, evidently determined to make a start on the job as quickly as possible, completely undeterred by the fact that he was leaking vital fluids like a corroding tap.

‘Is the Magos Senioris safe?’ I asked urgently, before the tidal wave of bloodlust could sweep him too far away for rational discourse.

‘He is,’ Kyper confirmed, then leapt back into the fray, apparently intent on ripping the next ’stealer unfortunate enough to cross his path limb from limb.<sup>83</sup> That was something, anyway; if Dysen was still in the hangar, his shuttle must be too, and there was still a chance I could use both to get my own miserable carcass to safety. An optimistic thought which lasted all of the next two or three seconds, at which point I got my first clear sight of the battle raging within the landing bay.

‘Hybrids!’ Jurgen said with loathing, directing a stream of lasgun fire at a hunched, three-armed monstrosity hefting the hellgun it had just taken from a dying skitarii, with every sign of being able to use it, an impression it confirmed a moment later by turning it on us. The hail of high energy lasbolts went wide, however, and before it could rectify its mistake, my aide’s superior marksmanship took it down with a clean shot to the head.

‘Several,’ I agreed, spotting more of the semi-human abominations, with a growing sense of puzzlement. Genestealers were common enough in the front ranks of a tyranid invasion, but I’d never heard of them being accompanied by their cross-species offspring before. They only appeared after implanted victims of the brood mind had been embedded in a world’s population for at least a generation. But there had been no reports of the kind of social turmoil which would point to a genestealer cult being active on Fecundia, and in any case, among so heavily augmented a population, I’d have expected them to find slim pickings indeed.

Then another bounding purestrain tried to take my head off with a swipe from its fearsome talons, and I had no more time to mull the matter over. Diving aside in the nick of time, I cut at its neck, being rewarded with a gout of noxious fluid before Jurgen brought it down with another burst of lasgun fire.

‘Over there, sir,’ my aide called, and through the maelstrom of running, shooting, slashing figures, all of them inhumanly fast and lithe, whether



augmented human or xenos abomination, I caught sight of Dysen and his bodyguards at last. They seemed to have had the same idea as I'd had, attempting to punch through the melee to the shuttle which had brought them here, but they weren't getting very far. The majority of the 'stealers and their progeny were clustered under the spread wings of the great transport vessel, still resting on the lift which had brought it below, like a brood of chicks seeking the protection of its parent. The sheer press of their numbers was effectively cutting the tech-priest and his party off from it, which meant there wasn't much chance of me getting aboard unshredded either.

'What's going on?' I yelled, as our hacking, slashing, and las-bolt-punctuated progress brought us within earshot of the Magos Senioris at last. 'Kildhar had only just told us you were coming, then all hell broke loose!' I'd made for him as soon as my aide pointed him out, of course, partly to look as if I was trying to make good on my ill-advised boast, but mainly because putting a party of heavily-armed skitarii between me and the 'stealers seemed like my best chance of getting out of here with a full complement of limbs.

'Then you know as much as I do,' Dysen said, remarkably testily for a man who was supposed to be above such petty human traits as an emotional reaction to stress. But then I don't imagine his ordered, rational world had ever been rocked quite so much before.

I shot a purestrain which had just counted out another of the skitarii, clambering over the corpse of its victim in its eagerness to get to Dysen, taking it in the throat as it hinged its jaws impossibly wide in the disconcerting way such creatures do. It collapsed across the body of its final victim, twitching and gurgling its last, although I'm bound to admit the kill had been a lucky one, and probably wouldn't have taken place at all if it hadn't taken a battering from the skitarii before my turn came around. 'Persistent, aren't they?' I said, feeling a show of insouciance would go down well if anyone was recording this scrap for posterity.<sup>84</sup>

'My gratitude, commissar,' Dysen said, ducking behind what was left of his escort with prudent alacrity. 'I was informed you were on your way, but feared you'd perished.'

'I was thinking the same thing about you,' I riposted. Apparently my conversation downstairs<sup>85</sup> had indeed been passed on by whatever arcane means the cogboys used to keep in touch with one another. I indicated the

shuttle. 'We need to get you back aboard, and out of here. Is there a safe haven the tyranids haven't landed near yet?'

'There's been no landing,' Dysen said, sounding as confused as his implanted vox-coder would allow. 'Not so much as a single spore.'

'Then where the hell have all the 'stealers come from?' I demanded. The xenos began to pull back, towards the shuttle on the lift platform where so many of them had already taken refuge. The skitarii rallied, harrying them from all sides with hellgun fire. Most of the hybrids had managed to scavenge weapons of their own by now, and replied with alacrity, but with far less accuracy or effect.

'I have no idea,' Dysen said, his even mechanical tone somehow managing to convey that this was a state of affairs he was far from happy with, intended to rectify at the earliest opportunity, and that if anyone was responsible for the creatures being able to infiltrate the shrine they were in for a far from merry time. 'They attacked the hangar as soon as we disembarked.'

'I see,' I said, sending a couple of las-bolts after the disengaging brood, the palms of my hands tingling as they always did when my subconscious started jumping up and down, yelling, in an effort to get my forebrain to recognise looming catastrophe when it saw it. Something really wasn't right about the 'stealers' tactics.

'We've got 'em on the run, at least,' Jurgen said, snapping a fresh powercell into his lasgun. He glanced at me. 'Last one, sir. Then I'm down to the bayonet.'

'That won't be necessary,' Kyper interrupted, trotting across to join us, looking more like a carcass stapled together with augmetics than ever; when he finally ran out of combat drugs, he was going to drop like a puppet whose strings had been cut. But at least he was in the right place to be put back together, I supposed. 'They're going to ground in the shuttle. If we send in the heavy flamers, we'll get the lot.'

'Oh, Throne,' I said, the coin dropping at last. Retreating 'stealers never congregated in the middle of an open space, they always ran for cover in the shadows, from where they could mount another ambush. 'They're not going to ground!' I pointed to a couple of perfectly human-looking figures in the middle of the pack, one wearing a torn and ragged flight suit. 'They're planning to fly out of here!'

'That's ridiculous,' Dysen said. 'Genestealers aren't capable of operating

complex mechanica. Piloting a shuttle requires dexterity and intellect.'

'Which their hybrids possess!' I practically screamed at him. I'm no expert on the subject, but I'd encountered enough nests of the pernicious creatures to know that, after a few generations, some of their offspring are all but indistinguishable from humans.<sup>86</sup> 'Besides, they've implanted the pilot!'

'How can you tell?' Kyper asked, in what seemed like honest confusion.

'Because he looks like he's bladdered,' Jurgan supplied helpfully, 'and cogboys don't drink.' As if to underline his words, the pilot stumbled, clutched at the arm of the nearest multi-limbed horror to steady himself, and staggered on, leaning against it for support, looking remarkably like a couple of Guardsmen determined to sample every bar in town before their two day pass expires.

'The brood mind is still trying to integrate him,' I explained, rather more diplomatically, 'which is why he seems so disorientated. In a short while, even his closest friends won't notice anything out of the ordinary.'

'He hardly seems in a fit state to fly,' Kyper said, undeterred. 'And our heavy combat servitors will have scoured the vessel long before he is.'

'He doesn't have to be,' I explained, as though to a child. As if to underline the urgency of the situation, a thin wisp of sulphurous vapour drifted in though the open hangar roof, and I watched it coil around the supporting girderwork with distant fascination, as though seeing the future of this world in microcosm. If the brood escaped from here, they'd go to ground, spreading their taint until everything was enmeshed in their toxic grip, waiting for the day they grew strong enough to challenge humanity for the mastery of Fecundia. 'The brood mind has access to all his knowledge. One of the hybrids can fly the ship.'

'It seems you're right,' Dysen said, to my surprise. 'One of them is now seating itself on the flight deck.' Emperor alone knows how he could tell that,<sup>87</sup> but I was happy to take his word for it. Any doubts I might have had about his veracity were rapidly dispelled by the rising scream of the shuttle's engines as they powered up for take-off.

'Then there's no time to lose,' Kyper said decisively, rallying what was left of his men with a rapidly modulated squeal of high-pitched gibberish which made my teeth ache. 'We must assault before they leave the ground.' He turned to me, and for a heart-stopping instant I thought I was going to be invited to lead this suicidal charge down the maw of the enemy. 'Commissar, I must ask you to ensure the safety of the Magos Senioris.'

‘I’m gratified by your confidence,’ I said gravely, careful not to say anything that sounded like a guarantee. For once I wasn’t going to have to work at extricating myself from the sharp end, and I took a moment to savour the novelty.

In another moment they’d gone, charging towards the shuttle with all the finesse of a mob of orks, but I couldn’t deny they looked well nigh unstoppable. The brood mind clearly disagreed, though, as a flood of enraged chitin boiled out of the open boarding ramp, meeting them head-on in a clash which seemed to shake the very walls.

‘Why don’t they just take off?’ Jurgen wondered aloud as battle was joined anew, with inhuman ferocity on both sides. Talon against chainblade, las-bolt against fang, the eventual winner anybody’s guess. Watching the intricate dance of that lethal melee, I could only be thankful that this time I’d been left on the sidelines. ‘They were all aboard and ready to go.’

‘A good question,’ I mused, my palms tingling again. We were missing something, I was sure of it. Then a flash of movement caught my eye, and I whirled to face the door. ‘And one with a bloody bad answer!’ Which I should have expected. After all, I’d heard firing elsewhere in the building on my way up here. If I’d thought about it at all, other than simply trying to avoid it, I would have assumed it was just a handful of stray ‘stealers like the ones Jurgen and I had encountered being tidied up by the skitarii, but this was something far worse.

‘That’s the broodlord,’ Jurgen supplied helpfully, as if I hadn’t recognised the terrifying apparition at once. I’d faced another just like it in the catacombs beneath Gravalax, and it would have been the end of me if Jurgen hadn’t barbequed it with the melta, which was currently tucked away somewhere in the nest of clutter that constituted his quarters aboard the flagship. No point bemoaning its absence though, I might as well wish for a Leman Russ or Space Marine Dreadnought to hide behind. We’d just have to make do with what we had, and, if all else failed, make sure it got to Dysen before it reached me.

‘Explains what they were waiting for,’ I agreed, making the best show I could of readying my weapons. The monstrous creature prowled into the hangar, looming over its progeny and the beleaguered defenders alike, half again as tall as any of them. Like the purestrains, all six of its limbs were tipped with talons capable of ripping through ceramite, and its tail was barbed, scything deep gouges in the floor and walls as it lashed to and fro.

Its head turned slowly from side to side as it advanced, as if sniffing the air, although that seemed like a quick route to asphyxiation so far as I could see. Then it broke into a loping run, bounding towards the shuttle, seemingly indifferent to the fate of its broodmates.

‘Stop it!’ Dysen bellowed, his usual flat monotone boosted by some kind of implanted amplivox, which I presume he’d activated so I could hear him clearly over the din of the battle taking place around the boarding ramp.<sup>88</sup> Unfortunately the broodlord heard him too, and turned aside, bearing down on us like death itself coming to claim my very soul. Why it would have bothered with us, instead of making directly for the shuttle and safety, I have no idea: perhaps it just feared a flank attack, and was intending to take us out of the equation first, or perhaps the last few moments of the purestrains we’d killed in the corridor were still echoing round the brood mind, prompting it to take posthumous revenge on their behalf.<sup>89</sup>

I tried to move as the hideous thing charged straight at me, its jaws agape, affording me far too good a view of the teeth poised to bite off my head with a single snap, but my limbs refused to obey. I’d been transfixed by terror before, of course, so often that the sensation had almost come to feel comfortably familiar, but it had always been momentary. My sense of self-preservation had kicked in again within an instant, reflex and the instinct to survive urging me into motion. This time, however, I remained paralysed, my eyes locked on those of the creature before me, overwhelmed by the utter futility of attempting to oppose it.

‘Nice big target, anyway, sir,’ Jurgen said cheerfully, opening fire on full auto, seemingly unworried by his rapidly-draining powerclip. And why would he be? If we didn’t bring the hideous killing machine down in the next few seconds, we’d be too dead to care about conserving ammo, and any we had saved would be of no further use to us anyway.

Something about his voice snapped me out of my stupor, and I rattled off a series of shots from my laspistol, wondering what in the name of the Throne had got into me.<sup>90</sup> We might just as well have been shooting at a Baneblade for all the good our las-bolts did this time, however, succeeding in nothing more than adding to the already impressive collection of cauterised craters pocking the surface of its thick natural armour. (If anything about so vile a piece of tyranid selective breeding could ever be described as ‘natural’.) I threw myself aside as it took a swipe at me with its abdominal scything claws, and parried the blow with my chainsword, which

was almost swept out of my hand as a consequence. I rode the blow, rolling desperately clear as the patriarch turned to follow me, which, perhaps fortunately, took it away from Dysen. Right at that moment I'd have had no objection at all to the ghastly creature chewing a few lumps out of him, but in retrospect the consequences for the already shaky alliance I was supposed to be holding together would not have been good.

'Krak grenade!' I called, hoping Jurgen had more than the one he'd already used, but my aide shook his head regretfully.

'None left,' he called back. 'Got a couple of frags though.' Which would do as much harm to me as the scuttling horror I was fighting for my life against, and we both knew it. He shook his head ruefully. 'Never thought we'd need armour-piercing.'

I looked desperately around for help. The skitarii had troubles of their own, and weren't about to come to my aid, that much was clear. There were noticeably fewer of them in the melee round the shuttle ramp than there had been a moment ago, although there was a gratifying number of genestealer cadavers there too. The fight for the landing pad had developed into a grim game of attrition, with too much at stake for either side to stop short of complete victory or annihilation. I parried another pair of swipes from the broodlord's scything claws, one after the other, backing desperately away from the implacable killing machine.

Then a familiar odour materialised at my shoulder, followed by the welcome sight of Jurgen raising his lasgun to spit another stream of fire in its hideous face. Hardly had he squeezed the trigger, however, doing little more than making our monstrous adversary flinch, than the powercell ran dry. 'Duck!' I yelled, in the nick of time, and he did so, evading the clashing jaws by what seemed no more than a handful of centimetres.

I looked round desperately for some way out, or, failing that, some means of distracting the creature, and my eye fell on the Magos Senioris, doing his utmost to look as inconspicuous as possible for someone swathed in a gold-embroidered, vivid crimson robe. He'd gone to ground behind a bank of switches and dials, from which thick, insulated cables ran towards the lift, and the germ of an idea began to form. 'Dysen!' I yelled. 'Can you close the roof from there?' If something happened to prevent the lift from rising, the 'stealers would be forced to break off, either piling aboard the shuttle before it was too late, or diverting their attention to deal with the new problem; which would be hard luck on Dysen, I suppose, but at least the

skitarii would be able to give watching his back their full attention again.

‘That would mean overriding the blessed safety protocols,’ Dysen protested, his expression resembling an ecclesiarch who’d just overheard someone suggesting that perhaps Horus had been a bit misunderstood. ‘Without proper tools, incense or unguents!’

‘Does this seem particularly safe to you?’ I called back, hacking desperately at the thorax of the broodlord, doing little more than scratching a gouge in the thick chitin which protected it, and the tech-priest nodded briskly.

‘Your logic appears sound,’ he conceded, exuding a tangle of mechadendrites from somewhere under his robe and plugging himself into the controls. Short as the conversation had been, it had distracted me at a crucial moment. I just had time to register Jurgen’s warning shout, when a huge, taloned hand shot out and made a grab for me. I evaded frantically, almost making it, but the clutching fingers grabbed the hem of my greatcoat, yanking me upwards with an audible ripping of cloth.

I hung there for a moment, kicking and wriggling and making random swipes with my chainsword, hoping to at least fend off a strike from the huge claws which I knew for certain would disembowel me. Then the overstressed stitching gave way. I plummeted a couple of metres to the metal floor, landing hard despite instinctively exhaling and going limp to cushion the blow, and looked up, half dazed, to see a huge mouth ringed with razor-sharp teeth descending far too fast to have even the faintest hope of avoiding. Nevertheless, I tried, scrabbling frantically backwards, raising my chainsword instinctively.

‘Commissar! Stay down!’ a new voice called, deep and resonant, and loud enough to echo around the vast chamber. Before I could even think of mustering a reply, let alone raise my head to see who had spoken, the unmistakable roar of a bolter deafened me. The broodlord’s thorax erupted into a swamp of offal as a hail of explosive bolts tore into it, ripping its left-hand scything claw clean off, and it leapt back, away from me.

I sometimes feel as though my entire life has been nothing but a succession of mostly unpleasant surprises, but even as inured as I was to the unexpected, I must confess to having been taken aback by the sight of my deliverer. A Space Marine in Terminator armour was plodding into the hangar, the storm bolter in his right hand still smoking from the discharge which had so discouraged the genestealer patriarch. Twin rocket pods were

mounted above his shoulders, and he turned towards the melee with calm deliberation. 'Skitarii, disengage!' he called, his voice carrying easily over the din.

'That's one of the Reclaimers,' Jurgen said, as though the Adeptus Astartes' sudden appearance was in no way remarkable.

I nodded, having recognised the yellow and white heraldry with which I'd become so familiar on our ill-starred voyage in pursuit of the *Spawn of Damnation* as soon as I'd seen it. 'I should have realised,' I said. 'We saw the artefacts from the space hulk downstairs. Who else could have brought them here?'

'Who else indeed?' the Space Marine said, casually reminding me of their preternatural hearing, and discharged a rocket towards the greatest concentration of genestealers, while the surviving skitarii scattered in response to his order. It detonated in the centre of the group, scything down a handful of the loathsome creatures in a burst of shrapnel, and he began to follow up, dropping the survivors with quick, precise bursts of bolter fire.

'Interface engaged,' Dysen said, reminding me of his presence, which, under the circumstances, had rather slipped my mind for a moment or two. With a loud *clunk* the roof above our heads began to grind, painfully slowly, closed.

'Excellent work,' I encouraged him, wondering if the gap would close fast enough. 'Can they still raise the platform?'

'Of course not,' Dysen assured me, still basking in the flattery if I was any judge. For all their prattle about being above mere human reactions, the average tech-priest has always been remarkably susceptible to it in my experience. 'They'll never be able to get off the ground now.'

Which was tempting fate, if ever I heard it. With a banshee howl almost loud enough to drown out the screaming engines, the wounded broodlord charged forward like a Khornate berserker, scattering the reforming skitarii, who, to my relief, were once again screening the Magos Senioris and myself from any further harm. It thundered up the ramp, pursued by another burst of bolter fire from the Terminator, which made a satisfactory mess of the genestealer stragglers, but failed to inconvenience its primary target any further. The shriek of the engines rose another octave in pitch, and, to my horror, I saw the shuttle begin to rise from the surface of the pad.

'They'll never make it,' Jurgen observed, as though offering an opinion on the outcome of a finely-poised scrumball match, his eyes flickering between



the slowly ascending shuttle and the incrementally narrowing gap in the ceiling.

‘If that thing crashes in here, neither will we!’ I said, gesturing urgently towards the door. ‘Magos, can you disengage from the controls?’ Not that I cared particularly, but it looked good to ask.

‘The process is now irreversible,’ he assured me, the mechadendrites disappearing back into the recesses of his robe as he spoke.

‘Then let’s move!’ I said, suiting the action to the word, and running for the doorway as fast as I could, trying to look as though I was taking point in case there were any laggardly genestealers still about who might have missed the bus. The others were hard on my heels, the skitarii forming up around Dysen again, who showed a remarkable turn of speed for someone so weighed down with all the scrap embedded in him.

By the time we’d made it to the corridor, the gap in the roof was noticeably smaller than the length of the shuttle, which seemed to be fluttering around the hangar like a bird trapped inside a room.

‘We have them,’ Kyper said, with what sounded like vindictive satisfaction, despite the lack of inflection in his artificially generated voice. He and the skitarii levelled their weapons,<sup>91</sup> clearly anticipating a stampede from the shuttle as soon as it grounded, and determined not to let any of the ‘stealers find their way back inside the shrine.

‘I don’t think so,’ I said, as the pilot pulled the shuttle’s nose up, and triggered the main engine. A backwash of heat roiled across the floor, knocking the skitarii who’d been incautious enough to take up position opposite the gap in the wall from their feet, and charbroiling the scattered cadavers around the empty landing pad. The solitary figure of the Reclaimers Terminator remained standing, however, the searing wind appearing not to inconvenience him in the slightest, detritus and body parts swirling about his impassive form. ‘It’s just going to make it.’ And, indeed, it looked for a moment as though the almost suicidal gamble was about to pay off. The shuttle was practically standing on its tail, accelerating upwards through the narrowing aperture, but there still seemed to be a metre or so of clearance around its reduced profile.

The Terminator thought otherwise, however. The missile pods above his shoulders elevated to track the fleeing target, and a flurry of rockets streaked through the air, impacting on the main engine and the fuselage around it.

‘Take cover!’ I yelled, quite unnecessarily under the circumstances, and threw myself flat behind the comforting solidity of the wall. The rear half of the shuttle exploded, a sheet of vivid flame boiling like an incandescent thunderhead across the hangar, and the entire vast building seemed to shudder around me. Searing heat and a hurricane force wind blasted down the corridor, whirling loose equipment, wall panels, and a couple of stray servitors away with it, then the blazing fuselage crashed back to the hangar floor, shaking the walls once again with the impact.

Klaxons began to blare, and fire retardant foam began to issue from concealed nozzles, drizzling down on the inferno below like a thick, sticky snowfall. Specialised servitors activated, sallying forth from their niches to battle the flames, directing jets of the stuff into the hottest patches.

‘That’s put paid to ’em,’ Jurgen said, with mordant satisfaction. I began to nod my agreement then froze, the gesture half-completed. Unbelievably, something was moving in the heart of the blaze, half-concealed by the leaping tongues of fire, the dense clouds of smoke, and the blizzard of foam. Something moving towards us with evident purpose.

My hand fell to the laspistol I’d just shoved back in its holster – although what good it could do against something capable of surviving a crash like that was beyond me – but before I could draw it, and make an utter fool of myself in the process, the smoke cleared a little and I realised it was the Terminator, plodding clear of the catastrophe he’d caused, parting the flames like a curtain before him. I craned my neck upwards, fixing my eyes on his helmet, nestled below the raised, hunched shoulders of the bulky armour. A moment later the faceplate hinged open, revealing its occupant, who extended a huge armoured gauntlet, large enough to have crushed my ribs with a single squeeze.

‘Commissar Cain,’ he rumbled, in the deep, resonant tones of a typical Adeptus Astartes. ‘An honour to meet so staunch a friend of our Chapter.’

‘The honour is mine, to have served alongside it,’ I lied shamelessly. ‘Though I must confess to finding your presence here something of a surprise.’

Before he could reply to that, another voice broke in, which, in its own way, took me equally aback.

‘Brother-Sergeant Yail,’ Kildhar said, trotting down the corridor towards us, her red robe flapping with the agitation she was failing so dismally to conceal. ‘Have the specimens been successfully reacquired?’ She glanced at

the furnace beyond the door, and her shoulders slumped. 'I see not.'

'Specimens?' I looked at her, then back to the hulking Space Marine, who wasn't exactly looking shifty, but rather gave the impression that he would have been if the ability to do so hadn't been genetically engineered out of him. 'I think you've got some explaining to do, magos.'

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## THIRTEEN

‘You’ve been breeding the damn things?’ Zyvan expostulated, with a glare across the conference chamber at the Adeptus Mechanicus side of the polished steel table fit to freeze helium. El’hassai, seated next to him, looked equally grim, if I was able to interpret his expression with any degree of accuracy. Kildhar, still chastened from a long and uncomfortable tête-à-tête with Dysen while we’d waited for the Lord General and his retinue to arrive, quailed visibly, and the Magos Senioris emitted a burst of static from his vox-unit which sounded uncannily like an irritable clearing of the throat he probably no longer had. ‘And why were we not informed of the presence of an Adeptus Astartes unit on Fecundia?’

Yail, who had divested himself of his Terminator suit in favour of the lighter and more comfortable tactical armour worn by the majority of his brethren,<sup>92</sup> smiled sardonically. He alone remained standing, partly because none of the chairs in the typically spartan conference room Dysen had put at our disposal could have taken his weight without buckling, but mainly, I suspected, because that way he loomed over everyone else even more impressively than usual. Besides which, as I’d observed before, Adeptus Astartes seldom seemed to sit anyway. ‘We are not, properly speaking, a combat unit,’ he said.

‘I’m sure the genestealers you incinerated would be delighted to hear that,’ I replied, feeling the need to lighten the mood a little.

Yail’s smile became a little more good-humoured. ‘Forgive my imprecision. Every battle-brother is ready to fight, of course, whenever that

becomes necessary. But that isn't the reason we're here.'

'Then what is?' Zyvan asked, curbing his temper with an effort probably only I knew him well enough to appreciate. He was never going to be particularly pleased about being dragged down to the surface from the flagship to begin with, particularly after the rocky start we'd had, but to discover that our hosts had been keeping secrets from us despite their promises of cooperation had been disconcerting in the extreme. However forthcoming they were from now on, there would always be a nagging little voice in the backs of our heads, wondering *what else haven't they told us?*

'Observers,' Yail said. He hesitated, no doubt balancing our need to know against the traditions of his Chapter which, from what I recalled, tended to be long on keeping their own counsel, and short on being forthcoming with outsiders. No wonder they got on so well with the cogboys. 'For some centuries, the Reclaimers and the Adeptus Mechanicus have been working in concert. We seek out archeotech, when and where we can, for them to analyse, in return for knowledge we can use to fight the Emperor's enemies more effectively.'

'And you're here, now, because?' Zyvan prompted, making it clear he wasn't going to be impressed, intimidated, or fobbed off.

Yail looked surprised for a moment, then carried on, acknowledging the interjection with a courteous nod of the head. 'One of our Apothecaries has been exchanging information with Magos Kildhar. He is accompanied by several Techmarines, keen to further their studies of the Omnissiah in this most hallowed of places, and an escort of battle-brothers, which I have the honour to command.'

'Wait just a minute,' I cut in, an instant before the Lord General could explode. Zyvan's high rank notwithstanding, the Reclaimers still seemed to have a better opinion of me than anyone else in the Guard contingent, and my interrupting would be a lot less likely to put the brother sergeant's back up. 'You mean you knew about Kildhar's pet 'stealers?'

'Of course they did,' Kildhar said. 'They supplied us with our first specimens.'

'That is correct,' Yail agreed. 'A working party of Chapter serfs was ambushed by genestealers about sixty years ago, aboard the *Spawn of Damnation*. By the time they were recovered, most of the survivors had been implanted.' Precisely what the Serendipitans and I had most feared, of course, but by that time it was far too late to say 'I told you so'.

‘Before they could be cleansed, one of the Adeptus Mechanicus delegation assisting the cataloguing of the finds requested permission to study them.’

‘And that would be you, I suppose,’ I said, with a glance at Kildhar, hardly less warm than the one she’d received from Zyvan a few moments before.

‘It was,’ she confirmed, her voice not quite as even as a tech-priest normally strove to achieve. ‘The opportunity to study the breeding cycle of these creatures in secure conditions was almost unprecedented.’

‘Excuse me,’ El’hassai put in quietly from our corner of the table, ‘but all our information indicates that a tainted individual must mate with a normal member of their own species to pass on the altered genes. Is that not so?’

His intervention led to an audible intake of breath from among the Mechanicus contingent, or at least from those members of it who still had their own lungs. The tau diplomat’s presence in the most secure and secret shrine on the planet must have galled them intolerably, but we needed the xenos support against the tyrannids, and that was the end of it. Any attempt to exclude him after so momentous a revelation would have undermined the entire alliance, so the seething cogboys just had to lump it.

‘It is,’ Kildhar said, after an uncomfortable pause, during which it became clear that no one else was going to talk to the xenos, and, if the amount of chirruping in binaric was anything to go by, all the other tech-priests were of the opinion that it was her fault he was here in any case. ‘Fortunately, we were able to source sufficient felons scheduled for harvesting for servitor components, and use those.’

El’hassai went a peculiar shade of grey. ‘A difficult decision,’ he said evenly. ‘But the Greater Good sometimes demands hard choices.’

Kildhar nodded stiffly, apparently appreciating someone speaking civilly to her, even if it was a xenos heretic she’d probably rather see burned. ‘Some debate about the appropriate use of resources was involved,’ she allowed, ‘although the acquisition of knowledge inevitably takes priority over mere utility.’

‘I would appreciate a copy of your findings,’ El’hassai said at last, after a pause during which he took several deep breaths for some reason.

‘I have made it clear to Magos Kildhar that I expect complete disclosure,’ Dysen said, his even mechanical drone not quite managing to conceal his reluctance. ‘And full reports on every other line of research she is currently conducting.’ Needless to say, I felt a distinct shiver of foreboding at those words.

‘What other research?’ Zyvan asked, getting in just ahead of me this time and evening the score.

Kildhar smiled, in a fashion I found far from reassuring. ‘I suggest Commissar Cain conducts the initial inspection,’ she said. ‘After all, he made the work possible in the first place.’

I approached Kildhar’s analyticum with mounting trepidation, the tech-priest having been remarkably unforthcoming since her disquieting remark in the conference chamber, but I concealed it well. I was damned if I’d give her the satisfaction of appearing intrigued or disconcerted by it. Instead, I passed the long walk through echoing corridors, many of which still bore the mark of the genestealers’ rampage, in small talk with Yail, asking about my former acquaintances among his Chapter, most of whom it turned out he’d never met.<sup>93</sup>

‘Bit of a mess,’ Jurgen remarked, as we skirted a section of floor marred by scorch marks, bolter holes, and some disquieting stains.

I nodded in agreement. ‘Any idea how the ‘stealers got out?’ I asked pointedly, and Kildhar shook her head.

‘That has still to be determined,’ she said, probably trying to think of an underling she could plausibly pass the blame on to. ‘Many of the data recorders were damaged in the breakout, so it isn’t clear how they managed to circumvent the security protocols.’

‘I doubt they had to try very hard,’ I said dryly, ‘given that they can claw holes in ceramite.’

The parts of Kildhar’s face that were still fleshy enough to do so flushed, but whether in embarrassment or anger I couldn’t tell. Before she had a chance to speak and settle the question, Yail’s baritone chuckle echoed around us like someone lobbing boulders down a well, drowning out any riposte she may have made. ‘You have a point, commissar. But perhaps the question we should be asking isn’t how they got out, but why now?’

‘I see what you mean,’ I agreed. With their formidable combination of the purestrains’ brute force and the hybrids’ intellect, the whole brood could probably have broken out any time they liked. ‘They must have sensed the approach of the hive fleet.’

‘That would be my conclusion too,’ Yail agreed.

‘Every precaution was taken,’ Kildhar insisted. ‘The containment pens were surrounded by energy barriers as well as physical ones.’

‘To which the power supply was interrupted,’ Yail added, ‘by means as yet unknown, thus providing a salutary lesson in the perils of underestimating a foe.’

‘Not a mistake I’d imagine your Chapter would be in the habit of making,’ I said, giving in to the childish impulse to tease Kildhar a little more, but I couldn’t help feeling she deserved it, if her hubris had indeed been responsible for costing so many innocent lives. People in the Guard had been shot for much less, some of them by me.

‘They wouldn’t,’ the sergeant agreed, handily overlooking the leading role they’d taken in delivering the xenos abominations to Fecundia in the first place.

At which point we reached our destination: a thick metal door, like many of the others we’d passed, and at first sight equally unremarkable, unless you counted the number of biohazard warnings pasted to it. None of the others had had a genecode reader welded to the locking plate, however, nor a pair of Space Marines in full tactical armour standing guard outside. Both had their helmets on, their sinister yellow beaks<sup>94</sup> turning to watch us as we approached. Yail stopped to exchange a few words with them, confirming that the last of the stray ‘stealers had been tracked down and eliminated, much to my relief, while Kildhar got her genes scanned.

The door clicked open, proving that she was definitely her, and she gave me a tight smile as she passed through. ‘This way,’ she said, unnecessarily.

After all that build-up, the chamber inside seemed remarkably prosaic, so far as I could tell. I’d been in enough Mechanicus shrines to recognise the general layout, even if I had no idea what most of the humming, clicking, and flashing devices were supposed to be doing. The usual bright metal cogwheel was welded to the wall, and various liquids slurped and bubbled their way through labyrinths of glassware on a couple of workbenches. A handful of red-robed acolytes were trotting about poking things and staring at pict-screens, while a servitor or two took care of the tedious stuff. The only thing to strike me as a little unusual was a pervading scent of counterseptics and biological decay, pungent enough even to eclipse Jurgen’s body odour until I got used to it, forcing me to glance back over my shoulder to make sure he was still with me.

‘I take it the ’stealers didn’t get out this way,’ I said, and Kildhar shook her head.

‘Their pens are... were on the level above,’ she told me.



I nodded; we'd descended rapidly in a clanking, rattling lift, but my instinct for remaining orientated in enclosed spaces was working as well as ever, and I already felt certain that we were now far below the shrine's foundations. Behind the stark metal panelling surrounding us, and which acolytes of the Machine-God were so unaccountably fond of, would be nothing but bedrock. Unless you counted the warren of air ducts, power conduits, and service shafts that the 'stealers had used to effect their escape, of course. 'So this is your mysterious line of research,' I said, trying not to look totally flummoxed.

'This is just routine tissue analysis,' Kildhar corrected me, allowing herself a most unmagos-like *moue* of scorn. 'The research is through here.' She conducted Jurgen and I through the bustling analyticum towards an unprepossessing doorway which, on first entering, I'd assumed led to a storeroom or the necessarium.<sup>95</sup> As we passed through it, however, I found my pace faltering, while a barely suppressed gasp of astonishment dribbled though my lips, rendered visible by a sudden onslaught of bone-chilling cold.

We were on a high metal bridge over a deep natural cavern, every surface of which was rimed with frost. Since whoever had built it apparently shared most Fecundian tech-priests' distaste for handrails, I determined to watch my step carefully. One slip and I'd plunge to a messy and painful death. Jurgen, of course, was completely unconcerned, as sure-footed on the thin coating of ice as he would have been at home on Valhalla.

'Nice to see your breath again,' he commented, as though this was a good thing. 'Why's it so cold?'

'That, I'd imagine,' I said, pointing at the huge, humming tangle of pipes and metalwork at the other end of the gallery. 'It looks like a refrigeration unit.'

'It is,' Kildhar said, apparently miffed that a mere unmodified human could spot the obvious. 'The specimens here have to be kept frozen.' She kept walking as she spoke, as blasé about the slippery surface underfoot as my aide.

'At least they won't be walking out of here,' I said, although the shiver I felt down my spine at her words wasn't entirely due to the cold.

Kildhar apparently didn't feel that that particular sally merited a reply, merely leading the way towards an open elevator platform at the end of the bridge.

I took my place as close to the centre of it as I could, while the tech-priest engaged the controls and, with a lurch which nearly took my feet out from under me, we descended some fifteen or twenty metres to the floor of the cavern. This proved to consist entirely of ice, which crunched beneath my boot soles as I stepped out on to it, thin crystals of the stuff spraying away from my tread like flakes of finely drifted snow. The top of the ice was encrusted with hoar frost where the moisture in the air was continually freezing, although, beneath this thin layer, the rest was as transparent as glass. It was hard to estimate its depth, as the ceiling-mounted luminators overhead reflected back in dazzling patterns, but at a guess the bedrock floor of the cavern was at least as far again beneath our feet as the depth we'd descended from the bridge above.

'Commissar,' a new voice greeted us, unquestionably another Space Marine by its timbre, and I turned, to find an armour-clad giant emerging from a modular hab unit that had been set up within the shadow of the walkway above. This one was unhelmeted, as indifferent to the bitter cold as my aide, and, to my astonishment, bore a face I recognised. 'It has been a long time since our paths last crossed.' Six and a half decades, in fact.

'Sholer,' I said, extending a hand in greeting. 'The years have treated you well.'

'You too, evidently,' the Reclaimer said, engulfing my proffered glove in his own gargantuan grip. 'I trust the fingers are still satisfactory.'

'Eminently,' I assured him. The augmetic digits on my right hand had been grafted on by him, in the apothecarion aboard the strike cruiser *Revenant*, after my fortuitous deliverance from the necrons of Interitus Prime. 'I've a good deal to thank you and Drumon<sup>96</sup> for. I trust he is well.'

'As do I,' Sholer agreed, in a manner which made it clear that this was more of a pious hope than a realistic expectation. 'No doubt we shall receive news when the *Spawn of Damnation* is relocated.'

'He was still aboard when it returned to the warp?' I asked, unable to keep the incredulous horror I felt at the prospect entirely out of my voice.

Sholer nodded. 'When it became clear that transition was imminent, an expeditionary force was landed aboard in the hope of keeping the hulk in Imperial hands at its next emergence point. Contact has yet to be re-established.' And wasn't likely to be either, after all this time. Chances were it had emerged in the path of the oncoming hive fleets, or in the heart of an orkhold, or, just possibly, was still drifting among the warp currents.

‘The Emperor protects,’ I recited, to fill the awkward silence, and found myself hoping that in this case, at least, it would turn out to be true. Then the reason for his presence began to percolate through my surprise at finding him here at all. ‘*You’re* the Apothecary that Kildhar’s been working with?’

‘He is indeed,’ Kildhar told me. ‘Which is why you were given permission to visit Regio Quinquaginta Unus in the first place, despite the reservations of the Adeptus Mechanicus. The advice of a Space Marine is never to be taken lightly.’

‘I’m gratified to hear so,’ Sholer said, turning away. I fell into step beside him, trotting a little awkwardly on the slippery surface to keep up with his greater than human stride. ‘Although, it seems, we are to explain our work here to non-specialists despite my reservations.’

‘And mine,’ Kildhar added. ‘The Magos Senioris, however, is most insistent.’

‘As is the Lord General,’ I reminded them. ‘If we’re to defend this world against a hive fleet, we need every scrap of information which might have a bearing on that.’

‘Our research here is purely theoretical,’ Kildhar said, a trifle tetchily. ‘We’re attempting to refine our understanding of the tyranids’ genetic mutability, but that won’t make them any easier to shoot at.’

‘Unless they break free and go on the rampage,’ I pointed out, a little irritably myself if I’m honest. The bitter cold was giving me a headache, and the steady succession of surprises wasn’t exactly helping my mood.

‘There’s no fear of that with these specimens,’ Sholer assured me, with a gesture towards the ice at our feet.

I glanced down, and recoiled instantly in shock. A huge, gaping mouth lay less than a metre beneath my boot soles, large enough to have swallowed me whole, and I flinched aside instinctively. The huge, serpentine form of a tyranid trygon lay embedded in the transparent ice, inert and unfeeling, apparently dead. But then we’d thought that about the frozen army of such creatures we’d found on Nusquam Fundamentibus. I had no doubt that if this one thawed out, it would be burrowing its way to the surface in search of a snack as fast as its cilia could carry it.

‘Where the hell did that come from?’ I asked, relinquishing my instinctive grip on my half-drawn weapons. ‘Dysen said there hadn’t been any tyranid landings.’ The little voice in the back of my mind began chanting *What else*

*haven't they told us?*, just as it had in the conference room, but with a harder, more insistent edge.

'There haven't,' Sholer assured me, no doubt divining that I'd be more inclined to take his word for it than Kildhar's. 'These specimens have all been acquired from off-world, and were brought here in a completely dormant state.'

'Hence the construction of this facility,' Kildhar put in, determined to have her two coins' worth, 'to ensure they remained that way.'

'What happens if the power cuts out?' Jurgen asked, clearly sharing my reservations. 'We've seen frozen 'nids before, and they were up and at us the minute the ice melted.'

'It can't,' Kildhar assured us. 'The refrigeration plant is equipped with multiple redundant backup systems. The power supply could only be interrupted by an accident catastrophic enough to level the whole shrine.'

'Like an exploding power plant?' Jurgen suggested, and the tech-priest nodded, clearly wondering if he was mocking her, or simply getting the matter straight in his head.

'Which is hardly likely,' she said.

'Quite,' Sholer agreed, leading the way across the ice again, pointing out one specimen after another like an elderly dowager fussing over her collection of tea bowls. 'Over here we have the most basic bioforms, hormagaunts, termagants, and the like. The synapse creatures are in the far corner, and the burrowers you've already seen...' And, indeed, other serpentine creatures, some as large as the trygon I'd trampled on, others small enough to infiltrate a line of fortifications and fall on the defenders from behind, were still underfoot as we trudged through the thin scattering of frost.

'Where did you find them all?' I asked, no more enthused by the discovery that an entire army of the hideous creatures was right beneath our feet than you might expect. I was already sure I knew the answer to that, Kildhar's words upstairs taking on a new kind of clarity, but it wouldn't hurt to be sure.

'Nusquam Fundamentibus, of course,' Sholer confirmed. The two systems weren't exactly neighbours, but were close enough to make the journey through the warp as straightforward as such things ever were. 'There were a great many organisms which never revived, and the Adeptus Mechanicus there showed no inclination to study them *in situ*.'

‘Hardly surprising, under the circumstances,’ I put in dryly, ‘given how many of their colleagues got eaten.’

‘The analyticae of Fecundia are unsurpassed anywhere in the sector,’ Kildhar said, sounding affronted, ‘which the Nusquam Mechanicus are well aware of. They were more than happy to cede the study of these creatures to us.’

Jurgen muttered something which sounded suspiciously like ‘I bet they were.’

‘So what’s the main line of your enquiries?’ I asked, hoping I’d been in time to drown him out, but doubting that I had. Sholer, at least, had the preternatural hearing common to a member of the Adeptus Astartes, and Kildhar probably had some augmetic enhancement which worked just as well. ‘In simple terms, so I can convey it to the Lord General and his staff in language we can all understand.’

This time it was Kildhar’s turn to subvocalise, but since she was much better at it than my aide, all I was able to catch was something to do with blunt crayons.

‘Our primary focus is on the mechanism by which the hive mind is able to maintain control of the swarm,’ Sholer said. ‘If we were able to disrupt that, depriving it of the ability to coordinate across a wide area, it would give us a significantly enhanced tactical advantage.’

‘It certainly would,’ I agreed, momentarily dazzled by the prospect. ‘And are you able to?’

Sholer shook his head. ‘Our work is at a very early stage,’ he said. ‘But we believe we can identify some of the neural pathways involved.’

‘Oh,’ I said, trying and failing to conceal my disappointment.

‘Thanks to you,’ Kildhar said, a curious half-smile on her face, which left me feeling distinctly uneasy. She pointed downwards, right where she was standing, and, despite a sense of foreboding which grew stronger with every step, I plodded over to join her. ‘We have all the high-grade neural tissue we could wish for.’

I stared down at a seared and blackened piece of meat, about the size of a Baneblade. Raw flesh was livid around the necrotic patch, still seeming fresh despite the damage done to the far side, and I was incongruously reminded of a rare steak, charred on the outside while all but untouched within. ‘What the hell is it?’ I started to ask, but then fell silent as a memory intruded. Something huge and living, on the verge of taking flight, falling

back into the volcanic eruption Jurgen and I had triggered at the near cost of our lives. 'Holy Throne, that's a piece of the bio-ship!'

Kildhar nodded. 'One of its cortical nodes. Most of it was too badly burned to salvage, but some fragments of it fell on the ice fields and were frozen quickly enough to preserve the tissue. This was the largest and most cohesive piece.'

I tried to speak, to verbalise my utter horror and abhorrence, to ask how they could possibly have been so staggeringly stupid, but the words just wouldn't come. All I could do was stare at the hideous mound of flesh, which had the potential to destroy us all.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## FOURTEEN

‘They must all be destroyed at once,’ Zyvan said firmly. This time we’d managed to call our council of war aboard the flagship, and he seemed much more at his ease, clearly feeling more in control of the situation on his home ground although his reaction the previous evening, when I’d relayed the news of what I’d found in the depths below the Mechanicus shrine, had all but melted the bulkheads. ‘The potential damage if they revive is incalculable.’

To my well-concealed relief, his voice held no hint of his initial impulse to turn the battleship’s lance batteries on the shrine from orbit, despite his insistence for most of our long and somewhat fraught conversation that it was the only way to be sure. That may well have been true, but would hardly have improved relations with the cogboys, not to mention the Reclaimers, who would certainly have taken a dim view of a clutch of their battle-brothers being vaporised along with everything else. Besides which, the shrine was a large and solid structure, which would probably take several volleys to level. We were just as likely to melt the ice with our first shot, and let the damn things loose ourselves. All factors which I’d striven hard to convince him of. (I could just have pulled my gun on him, of course, but that would have rendered things distinctly less cordial between us, and I’d wanted to avoid that if possible. We’d worked together well for over sixty years by that point and I’d grown used to the benefits of his hospitality.)

Luckily, he’d calmed down enough to see sense in the end,<sup>97</sup> and we’d

worked out what we hoped would be a more diplomatic approach. After all, the lance batteries weren't going anywhere, and would always be available as a last resort.

'And how do you suggest we do that?' Dysen droned, from the far side of the conference table. If he was at all angered at being dragged up here, he concealed it well, although since Zyvan had travelled to meet him to discuss the genestealer debacle, he could hardly complain about returning the favour. No doubt he would have preferred to be consulted over a vox-link, but on a world where information was constantly being exchanged at a bewildering rate, the only way to keep anything confidential was to discuss it face to face, preferably in a sealed room, and even then your chances were only marginally on the side of success.

Accordingly, we were a small and select gathering. Apart from myself, Zyvan, and Dysen, only El'hassai and Sholer were in the room, although Jurgen lurked just outside it, his lasgun and dubious personal hygiene equally ready to repel attempts at intrusion. Kildhar had protested at her exclusion, of course, but since the Magos Senioris outranked her, and Sholer could answer questions about the research they'd conducted together just as well as she could, her presence was hardly necessary. The Space Marine, on the other hand, was essential. If we were ever going to defend Fecundia successfully, then the Reclaimers had to be kept in the loop. Once again, I seemed to be the only one they were willing to even pretend to listen to, so that meant asking their advice at every opportunity, to keep them engaged in the conversation at all.

The same thing applied to the tau envoy, and I shuddered to think what might be in the reports he was preparing to send home. The only mercy was that, lacking astropaths, the other tau would still be in blissful ignorance of the utter shambles we were making of our end of the arrangement. Zyvan had, of course, offered the use of one of our own choir, through which he could contact the astropath accompanying Donali directly, and El'hassai had, just as politely, refused the offer, knowing full well that he might just as well drop a copy of everything he sent on Zyvan's desk if he did.

'It would be quite a task,' Sholer agreed. 'Every organism would have to be individually disinterred from the ice, and incinerated, or otherwise rendered incapable of revival. Hardly something which could be done at once; I'd estimate at least a month. And let us not forget we have an unprecedented opportunity to gain a decisive tactical advantage over the



tyranids, one I would be loath to throw away.'

'Quite so,' Dysen agreed. 'The genestealer breakout was unfortunate, but the organisms we have frozen are hardly in a position to emulate them.'

'The commissar and I disagree,' Zyvan said, his tone remarkably even under the circumstances.

I nodded. 'I've seen how quickly these creatures can revive from hibernation,' I said. 'They almost overran Nusquam Fundamentibus after only a handful were thawed out to begin with. The last thing we need is to provide the hive fleet with an army of infiltrators before they've even got a spore on the ground.' I might just as well have saved my breath, of course. Sholer looked as obdurate as only a Space Marine could, Dysen whirled and clicked quietly to himself, equally unmoved, and Zyvan glowered at the pair of them, his choler rising. Seeing that this could only end badly, I turned to the tau, more to divert everyone's attention than because I expected it to do any good. 'Envoy, do you have a comment to make?'

To my surprise, El'hassai nodded, doing a good job of looking thoughtful, unless a cogitating tau always looked that much like a ruminative human in private.<sup>98</sup> 'Both arguments are compelling,' he said, ever the diplomat, 'but on balance I'm inclined to agree that disposing of the specimens prematurely would be unwise. If the Apothecary's research does indeed reveal a weakness in the tyranids, the Greater Good can best be served by allowing him to continue unhindered for as long as possible.'

Tech-priest and Adeptus Astartes alike looked dumbfounded for a moment, then relaxed as this unexpected declaration of support sank in. Zyvan looked equally shocked, then took several deep breaths, a primed grenade willing itself not to explode. I, on the other hand, having spent as much time as I had around diplomats, homed in immediately on the thinly veiled get-out clause.

'What exactly do you mean by "as long as possible"?' I asked, making everyone else sit up as they began to digest the implications of the phrase.

El'hassai steeped his fingers, a gesture I had no doubt at all was a practised affectation for the benefit of the *gue'la*<sup>99</sup> in the room. 'The dictates of the Greater Good notwithstanding,' he said, 'I also share the reservations you and the Lord General have expressed. I would suggest that while Apothecary Sholer and Magos Kildhar continue their endeavours, preparations are made to expunge the specimens quickly should that become necessary.'

‘Sounds reasonable to me,’ Zyvan agreed, seizing on the prospect of a face-saving compromise, to my unspoken relief. Against all the odds, it seemed, the tau was holding this ramshackle alliance together, rather than being the wedge that drove it apart, as I would have expected. He turned to Dysen. ‘Could something like that be rigged up?’

‘It would be a considerable challenge to ensure the physical destruction of so many all at once,’ the Magos Senioris said thoughtfully, ‘but the Omnissiah will undoubtedly guide us to a satisfactory solution. Perhaps venting the fusion reactor into the storage chamber would suffice.’

‘Then we’ll leave that in your capable hands,’ Zyvan said, avoiding any hint of sarcastic inflection by a miracle. ‘Please keep us informed of your progress.’

‘On both endeavours,’ I added, not wanting them to be able to claim they thought we only wanted to know about one or the other. As I’ve remarked before, the seeds of distrust they’d planted by trying to keep us in the dark about Kildhar’s research were germinating nicely, *what else haven’t they told us* becoming an almost constant refrain in the back of my head. I don’t mind admitting, the sooner we were out of there, and able to leave this benighted rock to its own devices, the better I’d like it.

Now we had at least the appearance of a consensus, the meeting wound down as quickly as possible in a flurry of broad generalisations and non-specific promises of action, everyone eager to be out of there before the others had a chance to change their minds or come up with further reasons to object. Sholer and Dysen departed in the direction of the docking bay as soon as they decently could, followed shortly by El’hassai, no doubt hurrying back to his quarters to compose an appropriately trenchant missive to his superiors, although how he intended to deliver it, I had no idea.<sup>100</sup>

‘I want that facility completely surrounded,’ Zyvan said, as soon as the door clicked shut behind the tau. ‘If the ’nids get free, they’ll have to be contained.’

‘That’ll take a lot of manpower,’ I pointed out. ‘Even a full company would be stretched pretty thin, if you deployed them in a wide enough cordon to avoid an orbital bombardment.’

The Lord General smiled. ‘If I didn’t know better, I’d swear you were a psyker.’

‘I ought to know how your mind works after all this time,’ I said. ‘Besides, it’s what I’d do.’ Which was true enough.

Zyvan nodded. 'We'll keep the lance batteries targeted, at least for now. We won't need them for anything else, unless the hive fleet shows up.'

'Which, Emperor willing, it won't,' I said, tempting fate as usual. I called up the area around Regio Quinquaginta Unus on the tactical display, and considered it carefully. 'You'll have to use the Death Korps. None of the other units will stand a chance, being deployed in the open like that.'

'I hadn't considered anyone else,' Zyvan agreed, and shrugged. 'The problem's going to be keeping them concealed, though. They're good at what they do, but that doesn't generally involve much sneaking about.'

'I wouldn't bother trying,' I said. 'The cogboys'll know they're there anyway. If they squawk about it, just tell them you've decided to give the shrine some extra protection now you know how vital it is. They won't believe you, but they won't risk calling you on it.'

Zyvan chuckled. 'They won't have the nads,' he agreed, which was literally true of most tech-priests, given their penchant for excessive augmentation.

At which point, our amusement was abruptly curtailed, as Jurgen knocked on the door. Even before the booming echo of knuckle against metal had time to die away, let alone either of us call out for him to enter, his aroma burst into the room, followed an instant later by his grime-encrusted face.

'Sorry to interrupt, sir,' he said, 'but we've just heard from the scout fleet.' He sucked his teeth, in the way he always did while trying to find the best way of putting something he knew I wouldn't want to hear. 'It doesn't sound good,' he added, after a pregnant pause.

I've never yet met an astropath I'd describe as sociable, which I suppose is hardly surprising given that at least part of their attention is constantly on the whispering of the warp in their minds, waiting for a message to form. I'm not easily spooked,<sup>101</sup> but I can't deny they make me uneasy. Perhaps it's the tattoos of warding, a visible reminder that they might be possessed by a daemon at any moment, or perhaps it's the way their blind, sunken eyes stare at you wherever you are in the room, as though they're looking directly into your soul.

Madrigel, the most senior astropath on Zyvan's staff, epitomised most of these traits: gaunt and skeletal, only his head and hands emerging from the shroud of his robe, he lurked inside his chamber like one of the tunnel ghouls said to haunt the lowest depths of the underhive in which I spent the

first few years of my life.<sup>102</sup> There was no question of us receiving a message so sensitive in the middle of the command centre, surrounded by witnesses, even if he could have been prised out of his den, so I found myself hunched in the claustrophobic cell in which he lived and worked<sup>103</sup>, trying to make him out as best I could through the all-pervading gloom. Having no need of light himself, he hadn't bothered to kindle one, leaving Zyvan and I to make do with the flickering illumination of the candles beneath the incense burner, which, judging purely by the smell, seemed to contain a smouldering pair of Jurgen's socks. (My aide, of course, I'd dispatched back to my quarters, having no wish for his secret to be revealed by Madrigel suffering a seizure in front of the Lord General.)

'What have you got?' I asked, a little more brusquely than I'd intended, keeping my eyes fixed on the astropath by a considerable effort of will.

His thin lips parted to allow his tongue to dart out, licking them in a faintly reptilian fashion which made my flesh creep. 'A good deal,' he replied, in a voice which put me uncomfortably in mind of the wind rustling through the flayed skins hanging from the ramparts of the eldar reaver citadel on Sanguia, 'very little of which has been rendered in a manner comprehensible to you.'

Which, coming from most people, I'd have considered an outrageous and deliberate insult, but given Madrigel's vocation it was probably no more than the literal truth. When I'd first been spat out by the schola progenium I'd assumed, like most of the line troopers I was serving alongside (or behind, if the enemy were about), that astropaths were little more than living vox-sets, capable of parroting anything dictated or shown to them. Only much later in my career, as I blundered my way into the upper echelons of the Imperial military, did I begin to apprehend the truth, that the crisply-worded dispatches and grainy pict feeds from outside whichever stellar system I happened to be desperate to vacate at the time had arrived in the form of fragmentary images and sensations in the mind of a sanctioned psyker, probably only marginally sane to begin with. Only after long and arduous processing could the original meaning be disentangled from whatever the astropath had first tried to transcribe, an undertaking which often involved the use of other sanctionites as filters, and which typically took far more time than the fluid situation in an active war zone could easily afford.

'Then just tell us what we need to know,' Zyvan said. 'What have you

heard from the scout fleet?’

‘Heard?’ The darting tongue tasted the air again. ‘Nothing. Babble. Still being worked on. But we all felt it. The whole choir.’

‘Felt what?’ I asked, already sure I wouldn’t like the answer. I was right, I didn’t.

‘Fear,’ Madrigel said, his dry whisper hanging in the air for several heartbeats. ‘The astropaths on the scout ships were all terrified.’

‘Doesn’t mean much,’ Zyvan said bluntly, trying to sound as though he meant it. ‘They’d been inside the warp shadow, cut off from the rest of the universe. Hardly surprising they would have found it upsetting.’

‘More of a blessed relief,’ Madrigel croaked, with absolute sincerity. ‘If there’s anywhere in the galaxy a psyker would feel at peace, it’s inside the shadow around a hive fleet.’

‘Apart from the tyranids coming after them,’ I added, feeling it was about time somebody in the room paid attention to the real issue. To my surprise, the astropath nodded.

‘Exactly,’ he pronounced sibilantly. ‘Which they did. There are many echoes of pain and fear, the smell of blood and burning. We don’t have the details, but the fleet has been in combat.’

‘That’s not good,’ I said, with considerable understatement. Their orders had been simply to observe and report, avoiding contact if at all possible. ‘Any idea how much of a mauling they took?’

‘A bad one,’ Madrigel said, and the last faint hope I’d clung to flickered and died. ‘Ships were lost.’

‘How many?’ Zyvan asked, his voice grim.

‘That will not be known until the processing is complete,’ Madrigel replied, his tongue flickering again. It was almost hypnotic, and I forced myself to concentrate on the rest of his face, which was hardly an improvement, all things considered. ‘But more than one.’

‘How about the survivors?’ I asked. ‘They must have got away if they’re back outside the shadow.’

‘Damaged,’ the astropath said. ‘Wounded. Traumatized.’ It was hard to tell if he was talking about the ships, their crews, or both; members of his order tended to talk in metaphor half the time anyway, worse than ecclesiarchs. ‘Limping home to lick their wounds.’

Zyvan and I exchanged troubled glances, the same thing occurring to both of us. There was only one world within reach where the battered fleet might

hope to find the facilities they needed to repair any significant combat damage, and we were currently in orbit around it.

‘They’re heading here,’ I said, and Madrigel nodded.

‘They are. We can feel the connection with the minds of our brethren growing stronger with each passing hour.’

‘Then the ’nids will be right behind them,’ Zyvan said. That much was a given. Engaging with the hive fleet would have alerted it to the presence of prey, and, at the very least, a portion of it would be detached to follow the survivors, to see how much else was on the snack trolley. If we were really unlucky, the whole damn pack of them would be heading in our direction by now.

‘I’ll warn the cogboys,’ I said, my mouth dry, keeping my voice steady with a supreme effort. Our worst fears had just come to pass. All I could hope now was that the warning we’d been given would be enough to prepare for their arrival.



*Editorial Note:*

*Unsurprisingly, Cain devotes no more of his attention to the fate of the scouting expedition. Accordingly, I've appended the following extracts, in order to place his account of events into a somewhat wider context.*

Transcript of evidence given by Captain Nansi Blakit of the frigate *Amazon* to the board of enquiry into the loss of the vessels *Egregious*, *Cleansing Flame*, *Emperor's Hammer* and *Xenovore*, 485992.M41.

Captain Blakit: We made all speed to the estimated position of the hive fleet, based on the information the tau had given us. In the light of the danger our orders put us in, I commanded the crew to charge weapons, and to prepare for incoming fire before making the transition back into the materium.

Admiral Jaymstea Flynt (Chairman): A precaution also taken by the captains of the other vessels in the flotilla?

Captain Blakit: I believe so. None of them being blithering idiots with a death wish.

Codifier Mallum (Administratum observer, recorder of minutes): May I remind the captain that speculation and personal opinion are not evidence?

Admiral Flynt: You may not. Captain Blakit's record speaks for itself, and any observations an officer of her experience sees fit to make are pertinent to this enquiry.

Captain Blakit: That's telling her, Uncle Jym.

Admiral Flynt: Strike that last remark from the record. Carry on, Nansi.

Captain Blakit: There was nothing on the auspex, although we knew we must be close. None of the astropaths could get through to the main fleet, so we must have emerged inside the warp shadow cast by the tyranids.

Codifier Mallum: Speculation...

Admiral Flynt: Quiet, Mallum. You're not the only drone around here who can push a quill.

Captain Blakit: So Commodore Stocker dispersed the fleet. Not much, but with a mean separation of about fifty million kilometres. I told him it was a bad idea, but he wouldn't listen.

Inquisitor Vail (Ordo Xenos observer): Why so?

Captain Blakit: He was in command. He had every right to disagree with the opinion of a more junior officer.

Inquisitor Vail: I mean, why was it a bad idea?

Captain Blakit: I thought it would be more prudent to keep the fleet close enough for the ships to be able to support one another with overlapping fire arcs. Captain Warka of the *Hirundin* agreed with me.

Admiral Flynt: But the commodore didn't?

Captain Blakit: He felt we'd stand a better chance of returning an auspex echo with the fleet dispersed. As soon as one vessel got a contact it was supposed to vox the others, and we'd all rendezvous around it.

Inquisitor Vail: Tyranid bio-ships are notoriously difficult to detect at a distance.

Captain Blakit: That was the problem. By the time the *Xenovore* was close enough to be sure she had a hard return, the tyranids had detected her as well. Probably from a lot further away. She was jumped by a swarm of the smaller drones, backed up by a couple of things the size of cruisers. We all responded to her mayday, but we were so widely dispersed that even the



closest ship didn't pick it up until over two minutes after it was transmitted.

Admiral Flynt: That was the *Egregious*?

Captain Blakit: It was, the only cruiser in the squadron. Commodore Stocker's flagship. The *Emperor's Hammer* and *Cleansing Flame* arrived about three minutes after she did, just as the *Xenovore* blew up. The tyranids were already aboard and overrunning her. Detonating the plasma core was the only option the poor bastards had left.

Codifier Mallum: More speculation? Or do you have hard evidence that the *Xenovore* was scuttled deliberately?

Captain Blakit: I can show you the pict feed of their chief engineer overloading the reactors just before he was ripped apart by hormagaunts, if you like. You might find it educational.

Admiral Flynt: You were receiving datafeeds from the *Xenovore* at this point?

Captain Blakit: From all four vessels engaged with the enemy. Commodore Stocker ordered the rest of us to withdraw, and get the intelligence we'd gathered back to the main fleet. Captain Warka and I protested, but he threatened both of us with a court martial if we attempted to intervene.

Inquisitor Vail: Very wise. If you'd tried, you'd be dead too, and we wouldn't have a clue what killed you. I take it the tyranids were reinforcing the whole time?

Captain Blakit: They were. We held station as long as we could, in case any survivors got off, but it was hopeless. The *Emperor's Hammer* got some saviour pods away, but they were grabbed or swallowed by the drones. The screaming on the vox...

Admiral Flynt: Were any of the surviving ships attacked?

Captain Blakit: We all were. The void was full of them. Captain Warka took overall command of what was left of the squadron, as he had seniority, but we were still so widely dispersed it was impossible to coordinate a defensive strategy. We hung on as long as possible, to get as much of the datafeeds as we could record, but one by one we were forced to retreat back

into the warp or be destroyed ourselves.

Admiral Flynt: And after you'd made the transit?

Captain Blakit: We rendezvoused in open space, outside the shadow, where our astropaths could make contact again. Assessed the damage, and ran for Fecundia, hoping we could get patched up enough to fight before the tyranids made planetfall.

Inquisitor Vail: You seem very certain that that would be their next target.

Captain Blakit: We were. The astropaths told us. The boundary of the shadow had shifted. Only one thing I know could account for that: the tyranids had changed direction to follow us.

From *The Crusade and After: A Military History of the Damocles Gulf*, by Vargo Royz, 058.M42.

The dire news brought by the battered survivors of the Imperial Navy scout squadron was soon in the hands of Battlefleet Damocles, and preparations for its deployment were made accordingly. From all over the sector, ships began to converge on the forge world Fecundia, determined to preserve it, for if it fell, the Imperium's ability to fight on against these ghastly creatures would be dealt a crippling blow. The majority, of course, were to pass through the Quadravidia system, which itself had remained in Imperial hands only by a near miracle so short a time before.

The tau, meanwhile, had turned their attention to fortifying a handful of worlds across the recently contested border between the two powers, seemingly unaware that at least some elements of the oncoming hive fleet had changed course away from them or, if they were, still fearing that these remained the most likely targets for the full fury of the tyranid invaders. In either event, they showed no inclination to divert any of their assets to the direct defence of an Imperial world, nor did the Imperium feel inclined to ask the xenos for their assistance.

So it was that both partners in the uneasy alliance looked first to their own, and awaited the onslaught.



## FIFTEEN

The news that the tyranids were on their way swept Fecundia like one of the bone-scouring winds continually ravaging the surface, and did about as much damage in the process. Most of the Guard units held steady, of course, largely due to the fact that the majority of regiments on planet had never encountered the scuttling horrors before, and I spent several days inspecting outposts and garrisons to spout encouraging platitudes, assuring them that if they could face down orks, eldar, and the dupes of the Ruinous Powers they could certainly send the hive fleet packing. The Death Korps were the exception, as in so many things, having lost scores of their number to a splinter fleet the year before, but, typically, were too heavily dosed up on combat drugs to care. As usual, the only thing that seemed to bother them was the prospect of not taking enough of the enemy with them when they fell.<sup>104</sup> Needless to say, this was an attitude I found hard to understand, but quite comforting, given that I fully intended to keep them between me and the onrushing horde.

The real damage the news did was among the civilian population, of course. I must admit the cogboys managed to hold up surprisingly well, most of them making a reasonable fist of hiding their apprehension, but the foundry workers had no such inhibitions about expressing their emotions, and Kyper and his skitarii spent as much time suppressing riots as they did preparing the planet's defences. Most of the thralls who weren't out causing trouble preferred to spend their time in the temples of the Omnissiah praying for deliverance, although I gather they drifted back to the

production lines quickly enough once the tech-priests started telling them He'd find the job a lot easier if they built up a good stockpile of arms and ammunition first.

The only good news was the arrival of the battered remnants of the scout fleet, which reinforced our orbital defences a little, followed in short order by a steady stream of warships from all across the sector. Within a month Fecundia was surrounded by a hundred vessels,<sup>105</sup> which went some way towards easing my mind. If Kildhar's enhancements to the sensoria really worked as well as she seemed to think, it would take a very determined assault to land anything on the planet capable of hurting us.

Of course determination was practically synonymous with the 'nids, so I didn't rest entirely easily, not least because she and Sholer still had their collection of deep-frozen death and destruction stashed away beneath the foundations of Regio Quinquaginta Unus, and, despite their reassurances, I was far less sanguine about it not thawing out at the worst possible moment than they seemed to be.

A concern I'm bound to say that Zyvan shared, and voiced aloud the morning I wandered into the operations centre aboard the flagship to find him staring at the hololith in a thoughtful manner. The festering globe of Fecundia was surrounded by glittering fireflies, colour coded to differentiate the warships from the cargo haulers, and I nodded in an approving manner. The net seemed as tight as we could make it, and anything attempting to land would have a hard time getting down unvaporised.

'Heard anything from Madrigel?' I greeted him, still clinging to the hope that the 'nids would realise the pickings were better among the tau, despite the improbability of such a development, and he shook his head.

'Nothing good,' he said. 'None of our astropaths can detect a thing.'

'Then we're inside the shadow,' I said, while a prickle of apprehension danced across my scalp.

'We are.' Zyvan nodded grimly. 'There might be a few more ships on the way in, but we can't count on that. And, bar any news they bring if they do turn up, the next thing we'll know is the arrival of the 'nids.'

'Then we'll just have to hope Kildhar knows what she was doing to the auspexes,' I said, feeling an almost irresistible urge to thumb my palm as I spoke.

'I just hope she knows what she's doing in that bloody meat locker,' Zyvan

rejoined. 'They still haven't worked out how the genestealers escaped, and that was bad enough.'

'Sholer should be keeping an eye on her,' I said, trying to sound less apprehensive than I felt. I hadn't known the Apothecary all that well aboard the *Revenant*, having been unconscious for most of our time together,<sup>106</sup> but he seemed to take his duty as seriously as any other Space Marine, which was about as reliable as you could get. 'And the other Adeptus Astartes have got the analyticum pretty well locked down.'

'Well, you'd know, I suppose,' Zyvan said, sounding far from convinced. 'You've served with them.'

And seen them torn to shreds by the genestealers infesting the *Spawn of Damnation*; not the most comforting of thoughts, so I suppressed it firmly. Even more firmly than the associated idea that it would take a lot more than Yail and his combat squad<sup>107</sup> to keep a swarm that size bottled up if it decided it would rather be somewhere else.

'How are the Navy contingent?' I asked, looking again at the cloud of contact icons surrounding the leprous image of the forge world beneath us. A few warships were accompanied by runes indicating that they were still under repair, which was hardly surprising. Pretty much the first thing most of the captains had done was take advantage of the orbital docks to bring their vessels up to peak fighting efficiency, which was fine by me. The vast majority were registering as fully armed, crewed,<sup>108</sup> and ready to get stuck in, which was something of a relief, but only a partial one. I've never been all that keen on being aboard a spaceship under fire, particularly since my mercifully short attempt to breathe vacuum aboard the *Hand of Vengeance*, and the pict images of the horrors which had overwhelmed the tau explorators were still far too fresh in my mind for comfort as well. The thought of playing tag with those things around the corridors of the battleship<sup>109</sup> was far from inviting, and I couldn't help wondering if, formidable as it seemed, the fleet would be enough to check the advance of the tyranid hive.

Zyvan shrugged. 'Impatient,' he said, which didn't surprise me either. Most of the admirals I'd met were firm believers in carrying the fight to the enemy, an ethos the Navy as a whole subscribed to wholeheartedly, and I didn't imagine twiddling their thumbs in orbit waiting to be shot at would sit at all well with the majority of the fleet.

'Have the analysts got anywhere with the intelligence the scouts brought

back?’ I asked, which was as close as I felt like coming to asking the real question on my mind: was the hive fleet big enough to give the matelots a bloody nose, or would the first assault be pushed back in short order?

‘Still chewing through it,’ Zyvan said, a remarkably tactless choice of words under the circumstances. ‘But we know there’s at least a couple of leviathans among them. Possibly more, judging by the number of smaller bio-ships the imagifers recorded.’

Which was far from good news. Our only chance of killing one of the void-swimming giants would be to swarm it, and that would mean clearing a path through its screening escorts first. Large as the fleet around Fecundia was, it would be a very closely fought engagement indeed if it came down to that.

‘We need an edge,’ I said, uneasily aware that I was echoing Sholer’s words of justification for keeping his precious specimens intact. Maybe it was time to press him and Kildhar for some results.

‘We do,’ Zyvan said, unenthusiastically, coming to the same conclusion. ‘Think you can get some simple answers out of your Apothecary friend?’

‘Not if he doesn’t want to give us any,’ I said. My good standing with the Reclaimers had already won us more concessions than anyone else would have got out of a member of the Adeptus Astartes determined to mind his own business, but I was under no illusion that I could push that any further than I already had. ‘But it wouldn’t hurt to ask.’ It was beginning to dawn on me that a diplomatic errand to consult Sholer in person would be just the thing to get me out of the firing line when the fleets engaged.

‘Then ask, by all means,’ Zyvan said, his enthusiasm for the proposal probably having as much to do with being able to get on with the war without having a scarlet-sashed backseat driver querying his every move<sup>110</sup> as with any expectation of a satisfactory answer.

‘I’ll get right on it,’ I said, in blissful ignorance of the consequences to come.

To my relief, commandeering an Aquila was simple enough this time around, the locals having been considerate enough not to disrupt my travel plans with any more destructive mishaps. The atmosphere in the hangar bay was markedly different from our last flight, however, the tiny utility craft awaiting us dwarfed by the Furies and Starhawks<sup>111</sup> being fuelled and armed all around it. Jurgen and I walked towards our transport through a

maelstrom of frantic activity: deckhands lugging armoured cables as thick as an ork's forearm, small trains of warheads trundling past on wheeled trolleys and the stomping bulk of Sentinel power lifters, all reducing our progress to an erratic waltz, as we changed direction with every step to avoid a fresh obstruction. Servitors were everywhere too, of course, carrying loads too bulky or dangerous to be handled by the unaugmented, and there seemed to be an inordinate number of red-robed Mechanicus adepts about the place, chanting litanies, burning incense and sanctifying the systems of the spaceborne weapon platforms on which our very survival was so shortly to depend.

'What kept you?' our pilot greeted us, with a cheery wave through the armourglass cockpit canopy, his voice crackling a little through the comm-bead in my ear.

'Sightseeing,' I replied briefly, in no mood for banter, but well aware that distracting him with a visible show of annoyance was hardly the best way to ensure our safe and speedy delivery to our destination. The pilot nodded, taking the hint, and went back to checking his instrumentation, while my aide and I strode aboard and took our seats.

Our departure was as straightforward as these things ever are, the deckplates on which the small vessel was parked falling away gently beneath us, seemingly in concert with the rising pitch of the engines. Slowly we began to move towards the gaping maw of the inner lock gates, the metre-thick slabs of metal grinding closed as we passed through them. As usual, it took several minutes to extract the air before their outer counterparts started moving apart, gradually revealing a speckling of pin-sharp stars, most of which were promptly occluded by the cankerous face of the forge world below. During this enforced wait the pilot kept us hovering, balanced in place on the manoeuvring thrusters, which greatly raised my opinion of his skills. It would have been no easy task in the cross-currents created by the air pumps, and most shuttle jockeys would have set down on the deck to make life a little easier.

We drifted out into the void at last, surrounded by a faint puff of ice crystals from the residue of air the pumps had been unable to extract, and I looked about us, noting the visible signs of readiness to face the oncoming storm. A squadron of Furies coasted past with flaring engines, one of the groups screening the flagship from enemy drones, and, glancing back, I could see a score or more others clamped to the hull, awaiting the call to

action.<sup>112</sup>

Everywhere I looked in the sky, it seemed, a loose star was drifting, its motion obvious against the fixed backdrop of the galaxy: the unmistakable spoor of a spacecraft, too far away to make out, but betrayed to the naked eye by the light reflecting from its hull.

‘There’s a lot of them,’ Jurgen remarked, although whether this was intended as reassurance or simply an observation I had no idea.

‘Good,’ I said, turning my attention to the world towards which we were descending. It looked no more inviting than it had on any of the previous occasions I’d done so, the portions of the surface visible between the thick clouds of airborne waste resembling nothing so much as rotting offal. Even the lights of the hives had little chance of punching through the murk, which was being stirred up across half the southern hemisphere by one of the periodic storms capable of laying waste to entire continents (assuming the vast midden had anything so clearly identifiable as a continent to lay waste to, of course). Nevertheless, I couldn’t help trying to pick out our destination, or, at least, its general location.

Occupied as I was in this futile endeavour, it took me a moment to realise that our pilot was throwing us around in a rather more violent manner than usual. Fortunately the Aquila’s internal gravity field was remaining steady, or Jurgen and I would have been flung against the bulkheads hard enough to have broken bones. As it was, the rapid oscillation of the planet across the viewport was my first clue that things were beginning to go as wrong as they usually did.

‘What’s happening?’ I voxed the pilot, trying to keep an edge of testiness from my voice. It seemed as though he had his hands full, and none of the reasons that I could think of for that made distracting him now a particularly good idea.

‘We’ve got incoming,’ he told me, in a voice which didn’t have to add so *shut up and let me get on with my job* to append that particular message. Leaving him to it seemed like the best idea, so I switched channels and spoke to Zyvan instead.

‘Kildhar’s modified auspexes are picking something up,’ the Lord General told me, in tones of some surprise. ‘They started returning echoes about thirty seconds ago, and the Navy scrambled everything they’ve got to intercept.’ Which explained the violent manoeuvring, at least; our pilot must have been jumping around to get out of the way of the fighter



squadrons.

‘I can’t see anything,’ I said, inanely I suppose in retrospect, as my chances of picking anything up with the naked eye would have been miniscule. ‘Have you mobilised the ground forces?’

‘They’re as ready as they’ll ever be,’ Zyvan said. The trouble was, we’d both fought tyranids before, and were under no illusions about what that actually meant. I realised then that he must have been simmering with frustration, an unwilling spectator to a spaceborne clash of arms he couldn’t influence or participate in: perhaps the most galling position possible for a warrior of his prowess and tactical acumen.

‘Any sign of—’ I began, then broke off as something from a nightmare howled past the viewport.<sup>113</sup> ‘Holy Throne!’

It was hard to focus on, seeming to consist mainly of spines and talons, each larger than our shuttle. The one thing I could say for sure was that it dwarfed the pack of fighters snarling and yapping at its heels, still peppering its back and flanks with lascannon and missile strikes as it passed out of sight.

Then, without any warning at all, the void lit up, the main batteries of the warships all firing at once. And they had plenty of targets to choose from. The flickers of a thousand impacts, as energy beams and torpedo volleys struck home against steel-hard chitin, dazzled my eyes, and our pilot’s voice was in our ears again. ‘Hang on back there,’ he counselled. ‘It’s going to get rough.’

I bit down hard on the sarcastic rejoinder which had almost escaped my lips, and did as I was bid, cinching the seat restraints a little tighter. Jurgen did the same, his face paling slightly beneath its usual carapace of flaking skin, no doubt fearing for his delicate stomach, not something which usually troubled him until we were well within a planetary atmosphere. His knuckles were white around the melta he carried across his lap, and I found myself hoping he’d remembered to leave the safety on: the last thing we needed at this stage was to vaporise a chunk of the fuselage by accident.

‘Sounds as if they’ve arrived,’ he said, craning his neck for a better view of the carnage beyond the viewport. The tyranid bio-ships were retaliating in kind, lashing out with tentacles to ensnare the smaller vessels, and spitting gobbets of something corrosive which burned and melted hulls from a safer distance. The Navy seemed to know what they were doing, though, I had to give them that. I caught a brief glimpse of the lance

batteries of a cruiser slicing through the tendrils holding a destroyer in place, but before I could see the smaller vessel turn vengefully on its tormentor our Aquila lurched vertiginously, and began plunging towards the surface of the planet.

‘What was that?’ I asked, my sudden flare of alarm overriding my resolve not to bother the pilot unduly before we were once again standing on a solid surface.

‘Haven’t a clue, but it nearly got us,’ he snapped, and the starfield beyond the sheet of armourglass began to do somersaults. ‘We need to get into the atmosphere fast.’

Well he wasn’t getting any argument on that score, I can assure you. The tyranids were in space, and anywhere they weren’t was fine by me. The view outside began to steady once again, as the pilot angled the Aquila for atmospheric entry, and I took my last look at what I gather is now commonly referred to as the first battle of the Siege of Fecundia. I’d be the first to admit I’m no expert on the complexities of fighting in three dimensions, but I’d been involved in a fair few ship-to-ship actions over the years, and it seemed to me that we were more than holding our own. Most of the tyranid ships seemed relatively small, about the size of our destroyers or light cruisers, although I had no doubt that they had far worse in reserve; this was a scouting raid, meant to size up our defences in preparation for a stronger assault, a tactic I’d seen the swarms on the ground use innumerable times. Just my luck to be caught in the middle of it, in a light utility craft, liable to be swept from the sky with a single volley.

‘They’re launching fighters,’ Jurgen said, with an apprehensive glance at the nearest drone ship. I twisted in my seat, impeded by the crash harness I’d tightened a few moments before, and felt the breath catch in my chest.

‘Those aren’t fighters,’ I said, ‘they’re mycetic spores.’ I tapped my comm-bead, using my commissarial override code to cut in on whatever vox-traffic might be going on among the Imperial Guard units on the surface; bad manners to interrupt, of course, but under the circumstances I didn’t think anyone would object. ‘All ground units stand to,’ I broadcast, trying to sound appropriately calm and dignified, instead of frightened out of my wits. ‘Spores incoming. The tyranids are on their way.’



## SIXTEEN

I had little enough time to concern myself with conditions on the ground, however, as it soon became clear that our chances of reaching it intact were diminishing with every passing second. I could see only two or three of the spiky bio-ships<sup>114</sup> from where I sat, although I had no doubt that many more were uncomfortably close. All were taking fire from every ship that could get a clear shot at them, and probably a few that couldn't, judging by the frequency and violence of the evasive manoeuvres our pilot was making. By now the first faint tendrils of the upper atmosphere were reaching up to claw at our hull, so even the internal gravitic compensators weren't enough to prevent us from being shaken about. Jurgen groaned audibly as we corkscrewed through what felt like a complete barrel roll, a spread of torpedoes passing all around us to impact on the closest of the spaceborne monstrosities, but fortunately for both of us managed to retain control of his breakfast.

'It's breaking up!' he gasped, no doubt happy to have something to take his mind off the miseries of motion sickness, even if it was the prospect of imminent death. For a panic-stricken moment I thought his hypersensitivity to our hurtling progress had allowed him to spot some flaw in the fabric of the shuttle that was about to doom us all, then my eyes followed his, and I realised he meant the tyranid ship the torpedoes had just gutted. Fragments of flesh and ichor, already flash-frozen into deadly missiles hard enough to penetrate our hull if they struck at this velocity, fountained out into space from the site of the wound, and the dying drone lurched, plummeting into

the atmosphere less than a kilometre away, still spitting out spores as it went. Then it began to charbroil from the friction of the air, its chitinous exoskeleton sizzling and crisping as it spiralled in towards the ground.

‘Brace yourselves!’ Our pilot just had time to shout a warning before the atmospheric shockwave hit, sending our Aquila tumbling like a ration can kicked by a careless boot. How Jurgen remained outside his last meal was beyond me. The effort must have been truly heroic, and I have to admit to relieving my feelings with a volley of profanity which would have made a courtesan blush. In my defence, I can only say that it seemed to me at the time that it was either then or in front of the Emperor, and I already had more than enough ground to make up in that regard without letting rip at the occupant of the Golden Throne as soon as I arrived. Sparks flew from overstressed electrical circuits, and stress fractures cracked open around welded joints, but the engineers had evidently done a good job of consecrating the circuit breakers of the gallant little craft, as, despite my fears, nothing burst into flame. Just as well too, as we’d never have made it to the extinguishers without breaking our necks.

After a subjective eternity of noise and random motion our course steadied a bit, and I became aware of Zyvan’s voice in my earpiece, demanding to know what was going on in tones of quite gratifying concern.

‘We’re all right,’ I assured him, hoping to convince myself of that at least as much as the Lord General. ‘Just crashing a bit.’ Which, given the number of times I’d marked my arrival on a new world by making a dent in it, was perhaps a little more sanguine than it sounds. I’d managed to walk away from all the previous occasions, after all (or, to be more accurate, limped, crawled, or run like frak, depending on how likely the impact was to be followed by an explosion), and our pilot seemed to know his business. He still had some measure of control, and our engines appeared to be functioning as well as could be expected under the circumstances. All in all, it seemed to me, we were most likely to get away with nothing worse than a hard landing; certainly nothing to compare with our concussive arrival on Perlia, or almost literally world-shattering one on Nusquam Fundumentibus.

‘Glad to hear it,’ Zyvan said, after a short bark of what sounded suspiciously like hastily stifled relieved laughter. Once again, it seemed, my baseless reputation for sangfroid in the face of danger was getting another fillip.

‘We’re being sucked into the slipstream of the bio-ship,’ our pilot cut in, either unaware of, or indifferent to, the fact that I was already voxing on another channel. ‘I haven’t enough power left to break away clean.’

‘Why not?’ I asked, a renewed shiver of apprehension breaking through my carefully constructed optimism.

‘Diverting most of it to the on-board gravitics,’ he explained, which was more than good enough for me. If he hadn’t been, Jorgen and I would have been little more than a stain on the bulkhead by this time.

‘Probably best to follow it down anyway,’ I said, trying to sound as though it was a sound tactical choice rather than putting the best face on something that couldn’t be avoided. Never let it be said that Ciaphas Cain ever shirked the call of duty, at least when a Lord General was listening in. ‘Some organisms might survive the impact,’ (something I’d put money on, knowing the ’nids) ‘and the ones from the spores will probably rally there.’ Also a pretty safe bet, based on my previous encounters with tyrannid swarms. The synapse creatures would be attempting to coordinate the rest into a cohesive horde, while the others would be impelled by instinct to seek out their guidance. A little bit of aerial reconnaissance should be safe enough, enhancing my spurious reputation for leading from the front without actually having to put myself in any physical danger for a change, especially if we could pot a few with the Aquila’s autocannon<sup>115</sup> into the bargain.

‘Might be best to let them congregate,’ Zyvan said, ‘then take the lot out from orbit.’

‘If the Navy’s got time,’ I said. ‘They seemed a bit busy the last I saw.’

‘They still are.’ Zyvan sighed regretfully. ‘But relay the coordinates anyway, you never know. It’ll help get some ground units there, if nothing else.’

‘Will do,’ I assured him, then settled down to enjoy the rest of the flight as best I could. (Which I’m bound to admit wasn’t all that much.) At least the buffeting was beginning to die down a little, as the pilot broke through the maelstrom of turbulence into the pocket of dead air behind the plummeting bio-ship. It was crisping up nicely, so far as I could see through the heat-hazed air, smoke and steam billowing around it while greasy flames licked greedily at its leading edge. Fragments the size of a Chimera kept breaking off it, each more than capable of swatting us from the skies if it hit, and our pilot was forced to evade several times as these lethal pieces of scurf came

rather too close for comfort.

Between the heat haze, which tinted the horizon the colour of ackenberry preserve, and the cloacal palette of the landscape below, it was hard to tell where the sky ended and the ground began, so I was taken by surprise when the incinerating corpse beneath us suddenly disappeared in a cloud of ejecta. 'Impact!' I voxed, to show I was paying attention, while fist-sized nuggets of the Fecundian surface began to rattle against our hull. Not that they were the worst of it by any means. We were flying through a plume of particulates, among which they were the largest chunks, the vast majority of it being made up of gravel and dust, admixed with a generous dollop of pulverised flesh. 'It's down!' More or less, anyway; most of it was still bouncing, and breaking up into ever smaller portions as it did so.

At which point I began to detect a worrying change in the note of our engine, which began to waver alarmingly in pitch. 'That doesn't sound good,' Jurgen said, displaying his gift for understatement to its fullest, and I felt a sickening lurch in the pit of my stomach as the Aquila dropped like a stone. A second or so later it rallied, clawing its way back towards the sky for a moment, only to falter a second time.

'Brace for impact!' our pilot called, quite unnecessarily, as I'd already been in similar positions far too often for comfort, and knew an impending catastrophe when I saw one. I was already strapped in about as securely as I could be, so I simply held on and hoped for the best, nudging the barrel of Jurgen's melta a little further away from my chest with the toe of my boot. I'd just seen a shipload of 'nids being barbequed, and had no desire to share their fate at this stage.

The Aquila struck the ground hard, driving the breath from my lungs in a single explosive oath, lurched, slithered, and came to rest in an oddly anticlimactic lack of fire, flood, or rending metal. I inhaled deeply, and instantly regretted it; quite aside from Jurgen's proximity, the cabin was evidently no longer airtight, admitting eye-watering amounts of what passed for an atmosphere around here. I tapped the vox-bead in my ear, but could raise nothing but static. Evidently the Aquila's vox system was down, or at least unable to relay transmissions. Which, coupled with the lack of sound or movement from the cockpit, was disquieting to say the least.

'Door's jammed, sir,' Jurgen said, to my complete lack of surprise, giving the thick metal panel separating us from the flight deck an ill-tempered kick. It would be hopeless attempting to hack through it with the

chainsword, and using the melta in such a confined space would probably incinerate us with the backwash, not to mention the pilot, so I gave it up as a bad job and turned my attention to the rear access ramp.<sup>116</sup> Reaching it entailed scrambling up the steep slope the floor had become, canted a little to starboard, but the ridging in the deckplates gave us a firm enough foothold for the purpose.

‘This is stuck too,’ I said, leaning my full weight on the emergency release handle. Jurgen joined me, and, after a moment or two of concerted effort, and a few heavy blows with the butt of his lasgun, we managed to loosen it enough to crank the hatch open a centimetre or two. Immediately the passenger compartment became full of thin, powdery dust, suffocatingly thick, and the stench seeping in from outside redoubled. Choking, I fumbled my sash from my waist and tied it around my nose and mouth, obtaining a measure of relief thereby, although my lungs continued to ache and there seemed nothing I could do for my stinging, streaming eyes.

Jurgen followed my lead, rapidly wrapping his head in a towel he produced from somewhere within his comprehensive collection of webbing pouches, rather to my surprise I must confess, as that was hardly an item I would have associated with him in the normal course of events. ‘Getting it now, sir,’ he assured me, leaning into the handle with renewed confidence, and being rewarded almost at once with a slightly wider gap and a fresh influx of sand.

My aide’s optimism notwithstanding, it took us an appreciable time to widen the aperture sufficiently to wriggle through, which I did with all dispatch, having entirely lost patience with the choking tomb we’d been confined to for so long.<sup>117</sup> My eyes were met by a vista of complete and utter desolation: Throne knows I’ve seen some Emperor-forsaken hellholes in my time, but this was up there with the worst of them. A desert of rust-coloured sand<sup>118</sup> undulated away in every direction, unrelieved by anything save the glowering clouds of distant sandstorms, none of which, I was relieved to note, appeared to be moving in our direction. On the far horizon the looming mesa of a hive, its upper slopes shrouded in the smoke from its forges, was the only thing appearing to offer any hope of rescue or relief, although I didn’t put our chances of reaching it much higher than non-existent. It must have been a hundred kilometres away at least, across terrain so lethal even the Death Korps treated it with respect.

I extended a hand to help Jurgen up, and he passed me his lasgun and

melta, leaving himself free to scramble out of the crippled Aquila relatively unencumbered. Instead of doing so, however, he vanished again, with a brief 'Hang on a moment, sir,' and began rummaging energetically through the equipment lockers. Leaving him to his scavenging I returned my attention to the horizon, reminded all too strongly of the ork which had attacked me during a similar moment of inattention after our precipitous arrival on Perlia, and having no intention of being taken by surprise on this occasion.

It might have been my imagination, but I was sure I could see movement in the distance. I blinked my stinging eyes as clear as I could, and shaded them with a hand. A thick pall of dust still shrouded a large portion of the landscape, marking the site of the tyranid ship's demise, and I stared at it suspiciously, unable to make out anything more inimical than wind-driven sand and yet I couldn't discount the knowledge of what that cloak of dust concealed.

'Found a few things,' Jurgen said, scrambling up beside me. 'Might be useful.'

'They might,' I agreed, taking a quick look at the collection of survival gear he'd found. A collapsed habitent, awkward to carry, but essential if we decided to strike out from the crash site; attempting to sleep in the open here would be all but suicidal. A handful of ration packs, enough to keep us going for a couple of days, longer if we were careful, and about five litres of water. At the sight of the cool, clear liquid, I was immediately seized by a raging thirst, which I knew better than to slake; we'd need every drop before we were done, and my sand-abraded throat would just have to wait for relief for as long as I could stand it. The only other item I could see any immediate use for was a primary aid pack, which reminded me... 'Better check on the pilot, I suppose.'

Jurgen nodded, clearly thinking precisely what I was: if he was in any condition to have joined us, he definitely would have done by now. He certainly hadn't been fixing the vox, the bead in my ear remaining as silent as ever, despite me having cycled through every frequency I could reach.

On the verge of clambering down from my perch on top of the Aquila, I hesitated. I still couldn't be certain that I'd imagined the movement I thought I saw, and I didn't need the persistent itching of my palms to tell me I needed to be positive one way or the other before we moved off. I asked Jurgen for the amplivisor he usually carried, and raised it to my eyes.



The first direction I looked in was the crash site, of course, but if there were any 'nid survivors there, they were remaining under the cover of the debris cloud raised by the impact of their arrival. After a few minutes of intense scrutiny, I'd still seen nothing moving but dust eddies. I was almost beginning to breathe easier, despite the bitter experience of decades, and the almost literal unbreathability of the air, when I decided to sweep the horizon just to make sure.

'Frak,' I said, feelingly. Something was definitely moving, between us and the looming ramparts of the hive – not close enough to make out yet, but definitely in large enough numbers to raise a visible plume of dust in their wake, whatever they were. Heading in our direction, too. I swept the lenses to left and right, and this time, far closer, was able to make out the unmistakable six-armed silhouettes of a small brood of genestealers, then, about a kilometre beyond them, the larger profile of a lictor, flickering like a badly-tuned pict-caster as its chameleonic skin attempted to mimic the constantly-changing clouds of dust blowing about it. 'We need to move.'

'Right you are, sir,' Jurgen acknowledged, as matter-of-fact as if I'd just asked for a fresh bowl of tanna. Slinging the bulky melta behind him, and holding his lasgun ready for use, he slithered down the tilting hull of the crippled Aquila, taking the bulk of our supplies with him. A moment later I followed, after a last, apprehensive look at the moving dots in the distance.



## SEVENTEEN

My boots landed in deep sand, which almost immediately began to work its way inside my socks, the sharp-edged granules making my feet itch abominably. Within a few hours they'd be rubbed raw, and I'd be slogging through the dunes on a mass of blisters. No point worrying about that now though, and the way things were going, sore feet would probably turn out to be the least of my worries. So I put the matter out of my mind as best I could, and slithered through the drift towards the downward-tilted nose of the battered utility craft, following the furrow left by Jorgen.

Emperor knows I'm no engineeer, but even I could see it wouldn't be flying again without some serious benediction from the tech-priests. The wings were flexed in a fashion the designers would never have envisioned, its landing gear was badly buckled, and several inspection panels had been jarred loose by the impact, revealing partial glimpses of the mechanical inside. The nose was deeply buried in the sand, which reached halfway up the armourglass surrounding the pilot's seat. Though the panes had been cracked and crazed with the force of our landing, none had shattered completely, effectively hiding the cockpit from view. My pessimistic assessment of our pilot's chances of survival dropped even further, if that were possible.

Then the distinctive *crack* of a lasgun echoed flatly around the dunes, and I broke into a floundering run, drawing my weapons and barking my shin painfully on the sheared-off stub of the chin-mounted autocannon. As I caught my first glimpse of Jorgen's target, a reflex of revulsion stilled the

breath in my chest which, given the quality of the air, was probably no bad thing.

A trio of scavenging hormagaunts had ripped the cockpit asunder, and begun feeding on the body of the pilot. There was no telling by this point precisely how or when he had died, but I found myself hoping it had been during the crash. One of the gaunts lay twitching on the sand, part of its head ripped away by Jurgen's las-bolt, but the other two were already moving, bounding towards my aide with murderous intent.

'Take the left!' I called, cracking off a shot with my laspistol at the one on the right as I spoke. Jurgen complied, chewing up its thorax with a quick burst of automatic fire, and the hideous thing stumbled and fell, leaving him well beyond the reach of its scything claws. I wasn't so lucky, the hasty pistol shot at the target I'd selected missing its head entirely. Before I could adjust my aim it was on me, with a vicious swipe calculated to rip me in two.

I'd anticipated the move, though, knowing such creatures only had a limited repertoire of responses, and swung up my chainsword to block it. The whirling teeth bit deep, severing the tip of a razor-sharp talon as long as my arm, and I pivoted, bringing the screaming blade round to deflect the follow-up strike from the other claw I knew had to be coming. Gaunts always struck in the same scissoring pattern, hoping to catch their prey between the two keen edges of their primary weapons. Unfortunately for this one, it was now off-balance, and I was able to evade it neatly, slicing off the secondary arm which was reaching out towards me with its smaller, hook-like talon in the process. Undaunted, it came on, mouth agape, and stuffed with far too many fangs for my peace of mind, but I'd anticipated this too, and squeezed the trigger again, putting a las-bolt through the back of its throat and into what passed for its brain.

Too stupid to realise it was dead, the foul thing rallied, then leapt into the attack again, only to fall heavily to the sand as it finally got the message and expired.

'Sorry, sir,' Jurgen said, with an apologetic shrug, 'they took me by surprise.' He poked the one he'd downed cautiously with the barrel of his lasgun, and it twitched feebly for a second before vomiting up a rancid mess of bile and masticated pilot. Ignoring the mess on his boots, my aide put another round through its skull to make sure it wouldn't be getting up again, although, if I was any judge, it only sped things up by a second or

two.

‘Me too,’ I said, conscious of the irony. All the time I’d been scanning the horizon, the vile creatures had been right under our noses. ‘What worries me is how many more of them there are.’ There must have been dozens of spore pods ejected by the drone we’d followed down, and the others left in orbit, and they’d all have been directed towards the same area.<sup>119</sup> That meant there were hundreds of the ghastly things roaming the desert, if not thousands,<sup>120</sup> which was hardly going to make it any easier tramping across a lethal wilderness in an attempt to find help.

I glanced round apprehensively, conscious of how badly hemmed in we were by the whispering sands. The faint hissing of the grains as they were blown over one another by the wind would mask the sounds of any more approaching, and we couldn’t see beyond the next dune. All we could do was keep a sharp lookout every time we crested one, hope the conditions here made us equally hard to detect, and pray to the Emperor that none of the swarm were burrowers.

‘Better get moving,’ I said at last, conscious that if we delayed much more I’d lose my nerve entirely. Staying where we were wasn’t an option, as the hive mind would be aware of the loss of its meat puppets, and would surely send more to investigate.<sup>121</sup> Picking up the survival gear we’d dropped in the melee meant putting my weapons away, which gave me a moment’s disquiet, but there was no help for it. Our chances were slender enough as they were, without leaving our food, water and shelter behind. Reluctantly I scabbarded my chainsword, holstered the laspistol, and shouldered the habitent. It was just as unwieldy as I’d expected, but, with the melta slung across his back, Jurgen would have found it even more awkward.

Slogging through the dune field was every bit as gruelling as I’d anticipated. We soon discovered that scrambling up them was more effort than it was worth, every step sliding back almost to its starting point in the loose grains and raising clouds of the stuff which made breathing even more difficult. So, despite my apprehension about being ambushed, we remained at the bottom of the gullies between the sand drifts, trying as best we could to keep moving in the direction of the hive, although the haphazard arrangements of the dunes meant that we seemed to spend as much time moving parallel to it as towards our destination. My initial estimate of how long it would take us to get there revised itself depressingly upwards with practically every step, until it was so far in excess of the maximum time we

could possibly survive out here that I gave up thinking about it in sheer self-defence.

We'd entirely lost sight of the downed Aquila within moments of leaving it, which I couldn't help thinking was something of a mixed blessing; although we were now hidden from any further tyrannid organisms drawn to feed on the carrion we'd left scattered about it, it would have been a useful marker point in this wilderness of sand. My sense of direction, so reliable in enclosed spaces, was far less helpful in this accursed wilderness, and I was soon completely disorientated. Even the sun was no help, obscured as it was by the huge pall of debris flung up by the crash of the bio-ship. All about us was the same dust-hazed twilight, casting no shadows, merely deepening inexorably as the day wore on.

After what my chronograph assured me had been no more than a couple of hours of fruitless plodding, but which felt like a day and a night, I called a rest stop, and luxuriated in a mouthful of water. The parched tissue of my mouth seemed to absorb it directly, like a sponge, but enough of it trickled down my throat to clear the worst of the dust still settled there, and I followed it with a second swallow before passing the bottle to Jurgen. He drank as abstemiously as I, and resealed it, the lessons learned in our arduous journey across the desert region of Perlia needing no reminder or reinforcement.

'We need to know where we are,' I said, eyeing the side of the nearest dune with scant enthusiasm. But we couldn't keep plodding on blindly forever, and the short break and some fresh water had perked me up as much as possible under the circumstances. Taking the amplivisor again, I began to make my way up the sand pile. I'm not embarrassed to admit I used my hands as much as my feet, another lesson learned the hard way on Perlia, and probably a wise precaution anyway, since I had no wish to announce my presence by skylining myself.

From the top, the landscape looked just as bleak as ever, and I swept the amplivisor across it, finding little to raise the spirits. The far distant line of the hive, like a thundercloud on the horizon, seemed no nearer than before; hardly a surprise given the tiny fraction of the intervening distance we would have walked, but it lay more on my right hand than I'd expected, and I resolved to adjust our course accordingly. The dust plume I'd spotted before was far closer now, enough for the amplivisor to pick out individual dots among it, but the intervening haze prevented me from discerning any

further detail. Another good reason to go wide, though; the organisms looked unusually large, and there were at least a dozen that I could see.

I continued scanning the panorama before me, picking out several groups of gaunts wandering in the middle distance, and, far away, what looked like the leprous bulk of the pod which had brought them, but there was no sign of the genestealer brood or the lictor I'd spotted before, which suited me fine. Then, much closer at hand, I saw a gleam of reflected light, so bright it could only have come from a metal surface.

My spirits soared. Out here, amid so much desolation, the only possible explanation for that would be a human presence. Probably a vehicle of some kind, or, at the very least, an Adeptus Mechanicus altar, set there to monitor something, and through which we could attract attention and rescue.

'Jurgen!' I slithered down the dune in a flurry of sliding grains, which all but buried me as I came to a precipitous halt at the bottom. 'There's something metallic out there!' I floundered to my feet, creating a miniature sandstorm as I did so. 'I can't tell what it is from here, but it means humans. We can get a ride back, or call for help.'

'If the 'nids haven't eaten 'em already,' my aide added, and, recalled to the grim realities of our predicament, I nodded.

'We'll move in cautiously.' I'd taken careful note of the position of the object, whatever it was, and was sure I could find it without too much difficulty, in spite of the open nature of our surroundings. From here we'd just have to skirt two further dunes, and our objective ought to be in sight.

Before moving off, I drew my laspistol. Jurgen's point had been a good one, and any humans out here would surely become bait for the tyranids before long, including ourselves.

My aide readied his lasgun too, and we began to advance cautiously along the gully between the dunes, watching for any sign of movement. Despite an almost overwhelming impulse to break into a run, I kept my eagerness in check, all too aware of the consequences of letting our guard down, even for a moment. Tyranids excelled at attacking from ambush, and this environment seemed purpose-made to conceal a lethal surprise.

Sure enough, a surprise was waiting for us round the final corner, although under the circumstances I would almost have preferred more 'nids. 'Frak,' I said feelingly, followed by a few more choice expletives.

'That's the shuttle,' Jugen said, in his customary matter of fact tone. 'How

did it get here?’

‘It never moved,’ I said, kicking the half-buried cadaver of the hormagaunt he’d first shot. Like the others, and the rather more widely-distributed remains of our luckless pilot, it had already acquired a tenuous shroud of wind-driven sand; another few hours and it would have been completely buried. Come to that, the entire Aquila would probably disappear in another day or two. ‘We got turned around in the dune field somewhere.’

I might have said a great deal more, but before I got the chance something inhumanly fast and at least twice my height burst from the sand no more than a handful of metres away, and charged at me, its talons and reverse-jointed forelimbs straining in my direction, the feeding tendrils around its jaw writhing like a nest of snakes. The lictor had found us.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## EIGHTEEN

I reacted instinctively, cracking off a couple of shots from the laspistol in my hand which struck the ghastly thing squarely in the middle of its armoured chest, leaving cauterised craters of vaporised chitin as visible evidence of my marksmanship, but either the thick plates protecting its thorax were holding, or I'd failed to hit anything vital behind them. Jurgen began shooting too, with scarcely any greater success, but at least the burst of automatic fire managed to check its rush sufficiently for me to reach for my chainsword. Not that I expected to hold my own against something so monstrously fast and agile, and with so great an advantage in reach, for long, but it was clear I wasn't going to bring it down with the laspistol.

At which point I found the habitent, which I'd slung from my shoulder on that side, was impeding my ability to draw the close combat weapon. Without even thinking about it, I grabbed the bundle and threw it at the lictor, an impulse which undoubtedly saved my life. At that instant, a volley of viciously-edged barbs erupted from somewhere in the centre of its las-bolt-pocked thorax, hissing through the air towards me. By great good fortune my fumbling throw had caused the packed survival shelter to erect itself, the thin dome of weatherproofed fabric popping out of its cover in mid-air, and the flesh hooks snared it, ripping it to shreds as the thin ropes of sinew they were attached to attempted to drag it into the reach of the lictor's writhing feeding tendrils.

'The melta!' I shouted, knowing that was the only weapon we possessed capable of bringing the hideous creature down reliably.



‘Right you are, sir,’ Jurgen responded, leaving off trying to find a weak spot with his lasgun in favour of unslinging the heavy weapon from its awkward position across his back. Even for a marksman of his exceptional skill, the chances of felling a lictor with the small-arm alone were miniscule; we’d have needed a whole squad concentrating their fire to be certain of bringing something that size down with lasweapons. All I had to do was buy him the few seconds he needed to ready a shot, and try not to get ripped to shreds in the meantime.

Which was a lot easier said than done. I took advantage of the lictor’s confusion to get in closer, behind the tattered remains of the habitent, which it seemed to be having some difficulty disentangling from its flesh hooks: a fortuitous development for me, because until it managed to do so it wouldn’t be capable of winding them in again for another go, and while the fabric and memory polymer frame were still flapping about in front of its face its vision was partially obscured. Something else I could make good use of.

I leaped aside, just in time to evade a strike from the inner edge of one of its wickedly serrated scything claws, which, had it succeeded, would have snapped closed along the surface of its upper arm, cutting me in half. As it was, the deadly limb passed harmlessly over my back, close enough for the breeze of its passing to stir my greatcoat, raising a cloud of dust as it did so. I lunged with the whirling blade of my chainsword, driving in for a thrust to the pit of its middle arm, only to realise that the hand at the end of it was lashing out to grab me. Changing direction at the last moment, I narrowly evaded a grip tipped with talons capable of puncturing ceramite, and although it cost me the chance to plunge my blade deep into one of the towering creature’s few vulnerable spots, my hasty deflection robbed it of three of its fingers, leaving only a solitary thumb behind.

Surprised and hurt, the lictor roared, giving me the benefit of a blast of halitosis compared to which Jurgen’s exhalations carried the sweetness of a spring breeze, and charged in again, but this time I got the distinct impression that its attack was more cautious. The tyranids breed their scout organisms to remain hidden, attacking from ambush only when they’re certain of success, and when they don’t manage to make a quick kill it disconcerts them. This one seemed to be thinking<sup>122</sup> that it might have made a mistake in picking on me, and I was keen to reinforce that impression. If I could throw enough of a scare into it, its instinct to run and hide might cut

in, preferably before it dealt me a mortal wound.

So, in spite of all my own instincts urging me to turn and flee, I did the one thing it would never expect prey to do, and charged in, bellowing like a berserk ork, swinging the chainsword in the loose horizontal figure of eight old Myamoto de Bergerac<sup>123</sup> used to refer to as the floating leaf (although in my case, he used to say, it was more like a plummeting brick.<sup>124</sup>) At worst, the flickering blade would create a barrier between me and the lictor, across which it would be unable to strike without the risk of further pruning, and at best it would allow me another chance to do some serious damage. I didn't expect to be able to kill it, of course, but I could certainly make it decide that this particular meal wasn't worth the effort of trying to eat.

I seemed to succeed beyond my wildest dreams. As I bore in, the ghastly creature actually flinched, rearing back as I slashed at its belly, the tendrils around its mouth thrashing as its head rose up, then, to my horror, began to descend. I'd overreached myself, something my old schola tutor had chided me for on more than one occasion, and now I was about to suffer the consequences. If I raised the blade to protect my head from the descending feeding tendrils, the lictor would disembowel me with its talons. With nowhere else to go I threw myself flat, buying a couple more seconds...

Then the landscape vanished in a vivid glare of light, and the stench of charred flesh. Jorgen had fired the melta, in the nick of time. I looked up to see the hideous creature toppling to the sand, a hole big enough to punch my fist through seared deep into its gut.

'Look out, sir!' my aide warned, and I rolled aside as the thrashing, kicking monstrosity slammed into the ground exactly where I'd been a moment before, its death throes raising a pall of dust which uncannily echoed the slowly-dissipating shroud around the last remaining remnants of the bio-ship which had sired it.<sup>125</sup> I rose to my feet, skirting it as widely as I could, and went to join him.

'Thank you, Jorgen,' I said. 'Impeccable timing, as always.'

'Looks like the tent's had it,' he said, with a venomous glare at the now still cadaver.

'It does indeed,' I agreed, allowing the full realisation of just how badly we were frakked to settle over me. Without some kind of shelter, we couldn't hope to survive a night in the toxic wasteland which surrounded us. Which left only one option, particularly as the gathering twilight was now definitely shading into night. 'We'll have to bunk down in the Aquila

tonight, and make a fresh start in the morning.'

'Right you are, sir,' Jurgen agreed, as though our chances of actually making it to the safety of the hive were no worse now than they had been when we first set out. 'At least we'll have something solid between us and the 'nids if any come calling.'

'There is that,' I agreed. 'We'll take two-hour watches, turn and turn about.' Of course we were both so exhausted we needed far more sleep than that, but right now I didn't give much for my chances of staying awake any longer than a couple of hours in any case, and if we both fell asleep at the same time, neither of us were likely to wake. Ever.

'I'll take the first watch,' Jurgen volunteered, as we scrambled up the slope we'd both slithered down a few hours before. At least we had the bent and rent metal of the fuselage to provide hand and footholds, so it wasn't so tortuous a process as clambering up the side of the dune had been, but the effort still left us gasping in the foetid air. The wind was beginning to rise as the ground cooled with the onset of night, and the hissing, slithering sound of the sand grains drifting had intensified, rather more so than I would have expected, given my experience of nightfall in the deserts of Perlia. Right on cue, the palms of my hands began to itch.

And with good reason. From the elevated perspective of the Aquila's half-buried rump, the desert beyond seemed to be moving, with clear, malign purpose. A score or more hormagaunts were scuttling over the crest of the adjacent dune, to join easily as many again already milling around the corpse of the lictor, and I belatedly remembered something else the camouflaged killers were known for. Leading the swarm to fresh prey.

'It laid a trail,' I said, hoping Jurgen would attribute the huskiness of my voice to the dehydration of my throat. 'We have to get out of here now.' But a single glance at our surroundings was enough to demonstrate the sheer futility of that hope. We were already surrounded, a tiny island of life amidst a sea of tyranids, and that, I knew, could only end one way.

At first, the ghastly horde seemed not to notice us, being completely absorbed in the feeding frenzy which rapidly removed all traces of the deceased lictor, not to mention that of the trio of gaunts we'd killed before setting off on our futile circular stroll. They probably devoured the last mortal remains of our late pilot, too, although I tried not to look too hard in that direction.

‘At least they can’t shoot at us,’ Jurgen murmured, hunkering down in the lee of the wedged-open cargo ramp, which had already acquired a thin coating of gritty sand, but not yet nearly enough to soften the edge of the metal beneath it. He braced the melta against a convenient stanchion, steadying the bulky weapon as best he could, and carefully laid his lasgun down next to it. Continuing to work methodically, he replaced the partially discharged power packs of both weapons with fresh ones – keeping the weaker for later, as we’d certainly need every single shot we could get before long – and opened the flap of the pouch in which he kept his grenades. ‘Lucky I stocked up again on these.’

‘How many?’ I asked, keeping my voice as low as possible. I didn’t know how acute the gaunts’ hearing was, and I had no desire to find out the hard way.<sup>126</sup>

‘Three frag, two krak,’ Jurgen said, equally quietly, pushing the two anti-armour charges to the bottom of the pouch, and laying the others out ready for instant use. I could hardly blame him for bringing the krak ones along, we’d been more than glad of their extra punch often enough before now, but I’d cheerfully have traded them for another couple of the anti-personnel devices given the chance. Come to that, I might just as well wish the Aquila intact and the pilot back from the dead, ready to fly us out of here, into the bargain. But since none of these were about to happen, we’d just have to make the best use of the few grenades we had.

‘Let’s hope it’s enough,’ I said, knowing it wouldn’t be, and followed my aide’s lead, snapping a fresh powercell into the butt of my laspistol, stowing the used one in a convenient pocket in the faint hope of ever getting a chance to reload. Not wanting to find myself unexpectedly running dry, I made sure it went into a different one from the fully charged clips. I’d scabbarded my chainsword to make scrambling up the side of the Aquila a little easier, and drew it stealthily now, careful to make sure it didn’t betray our whereabouts by clinking against any of the metal surrounding us. After some internal debate I started the teeth spinning, on the lowest setting, partly so the characteristic keening wouldn’t be too loud, and partly to conserve the power, as I had no means of recharging it, nor time enough to do so.<sup>127</sup>

Despite my obvious fears, it was the wind rather than any noise we made which was to be our undoing. It continued to freshen as the temperature plummeted to levels which made me glad I hadn’t discarded my greatcoat

during the heat of the day (which the constant flurrying of abrasive sand would have made most unwise in any case), and which left Jurgen looking a good deal more comfortable. Not that he'd be really happy unless there was a dusting of frost on the ground, but, as he'd remarked in the storage facility where so many of these hideous creatures were being kept dormant, being able to see his breath was always a considerable fillip to his spirits. Unfortunately for both of us, the direction of the breeze was slowly changing, so that after a quarter of an hour or so, during which time the twilight deepened so much it became almost impossible to distinguish the gaunts as anything other than an inchoate mass, it was unquestionably blowing past us in their direction.

Dimly, in the gathering gloom, I saw first one brutally elongated head rise, sniffing the air, then another, and another, each turning in our direction as they caught our scent. As the first few to detect us began bounding in our direction, with the fast, loping stride of their kind, others turned to follow, until the whole pack of the monstrous, misshapen creatures was swarming towards us.

'Wait till you have a good target,' I counselled, all too aware that every shot would have to count if we were to stand even the slightest chance of keeping that solid mass of chitin-armoured death from rolling over us.

'This one's good enough,' Jurgen said, squeezing the trigger of the melta and sending a roiling mass of superheated air into the heart of the swarm. It punched a hole clean through the onrushing mass, felling several of the brutes, and crippling others, which fell, disrupting the charge. Jurgen followed up with another three shots in rapid succession, but for every one which fell another handful leapt over the resulting carnage, powering up the dunes towards our fragile refuge. The main advantage the melta had given us was flash-burning a handful of 'nids just outside the cone of destruction it wrought, setting fire to their spasming corpses instead of simply vaporising them. Now the scene was dimly lit by the flickering flames of their immolation, which allowed us the dubious privilege of being able to see what was about to kill us.

I cracked off a few laspistol shots, which must have hit something in so tightly-packed a swarm, but the gaunts continued galloping towards us, utterly heedless of whatever damage I may have been able to inflict. Catching a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye, I turned, to find that a second group had flanked us, and was now bounding up the slope in a

haze of scattered sand, barely slowed by the treacherous footing. Thrusting the pistol back in its holster, I picked up the frag grenades from Jurgen's pitifully small pile of ordnance, and lobbed one into the middle of the pack. It detonated loudly, its payload of shrapnel scything through the chittering host and felling a gratifying number, but still the rest came on, and I was forced to follow up with the other two before the charge was broken. Meanwhile, Jurgen continued to squeeze the trigger of the melta almost without respite, the actinic flash of the successive discharges even more blinding than usual in the deepening darkness, adding lightning to the thundercrack of the grenades' detonation.

With nothing else to do, I drew my laspistol again, and flourished the chainsword, using it to drive back one of our would-be flankers, which had persisted in trying to scale the dune despite the reduction of so many of its companions into their component parts. It met blade with scything claw, just as I'd expected, and I was forced to dispatch it in a flurry of blows.

'That's it,' Jurgen said, dropping the melta and seizing his lasgun. 'I'm dry.' No point in even considering reloading, by the time he'd grabbed a fresh powercell from the storage pouch the survivors would have rolled right over us. Even before he'd finished speaking, the crackle of his lasgun was echoing round the dunes, firing short, precise bursts designed to save as much ammunition as possible. What would happen when that ran out, I didn't dare think.

Engaged as I was in fighting for my life, I had little opportunity or inclination to pause and admire the havoc he'd wrought among the first wave of the swarm, but he'd undoubtedly bought us a handful of precious moments and I felt a few words of appreciation wouldn't come amiss, particularly as I was unlikely to be able to defer them until later.

'Good shooting, Jurgen,' I said, lacking the time for anything more effusive; besides which, we'd fought together for over seventy years by that point, and I wouldn't want his last emotion to be embarrassment.

'You're welcome, sir,' he replied, as phlegmatic as ever, continuing to fell tyrannids as he spoke. Then the lasgun went silent, and he ejected the powerpack in one fluid movement, his hand already swooping towards the pouch in which he'd cached the reloads.

He was never going to make it, that much was clear, the leading gaunt was already leaping into the attack, and my chainsword was stuck in the belly of the one I'd just dispatched. I desperately yanked the weapon clear of its

toppling corpse, and turned, expecting to see the top of the downed Aquila liberally decorated with my aide's intestines, and his assassin already turning its attention to me, but instead a blizzard of lasgun fire echoed across the dune field, and the leading gaunt was falling, almost cut in half by the hail of las-bolts. Huge, multi-limbed creatures were cresting the surrounding dunes, and, for a second, I quailed, wondering what new horrors were about to be unleashed on us, then realisation dawned. They were horses, protected like their riders from the hellish environment by respirators, and thick barding in lieu of the greatcoats worn by their masters.

'It's the Death Korps!' I called, exultantly, as the column of riders wheeled and began to advance down the side of the dunes towards the milling mass of the surviving gaunts; quite a hazardous undertaking, it looked to me, but the horses seemed to know what they were doing, keeping their footing well enough on the treacherous sliding surface, and leaving their riders free to get on with the important business of potting 'nids.

'So it is,' Jurgen agreed, as though I'd pointed out a casual acquaintance in a crowded mess room. Not all our rescuers were armed with lasguns,<sup>128</sup> a fact which became clear when launched grenades and goutts of blazing promethium from a flamer began to fall among the milling hormagaunts, along with the withering barrage of las-fire which continued unabated.

After that, the battle became a massacre, the Death Korps mopping up the last few 'nids in pretty short order, displaying the fine disregard for their own survival which so characterised the Guardsmen from that regiment as they did so. Indeed, they got so close that more than one of the gaunts finally expired under the hooves of their mounts, after first being brought down by close-range weapons fire, and, in at least one case, an explosive-tipped lance through the chest.<sup>129</sup> Feeling it politic to show willing, now that someone else was getting chewed up on our behalf, I took a few laspistol shots at likely targets, although, truth to tell, I doubt that they added much to the general sum of hurt being dished out to the scuttling horrors. Jurgen had much better luck with the melta, as soon as he'd changed the power pack.

At length, the field was ours, the only 'nids in view were dead or dying, and the sergeant in charge of the detachment spurred his horse up the side of the dune to stand next to the crashed Aquila. Bloodshot eyes regarded me through the round lenses of his full-face breathing mask, the pachyderm

snout of the air tube snaking up over his shoulder to the filter pack on his back, his head almost on a level with my own, since I was still perched on top of the crumpled fuselage.

‘Commissar Cain?’ he asked, in the flat voice of someone knowing it was a bloody stupid question, but determined to go through the formalities in any case.

‘That’s me,’ I agreed, unable to think of anything else to say that didn’t sound equally inane. I tilted my head in Jurgan’s direction. ‘And that’s my aide, Gunner Jurgan.’<sup>130</sup> We had a pilot, too, but the ’nids ate him. Never caught his name.’

‘Ridemaster Tyrie.’ The death rider sergeant nodded a perfunctory greeting, clearly a man of few words. ‘Lost our vox-man a couple of days back, or we’d have told you we were coming.’

‘I’m just glad you got here when you did,’ I told him, truthfully enough.

The eyes behind the lenses regarded me for a moment, and blinked, as if registering my dilapidated condition for the first time. ‘Least you had the sense to stay put and wait,’ he said.





## NINETEEN

We set off at first light, since there seemed no point in adding to the danger of the journey by trying to dodge tyranids in the dark. There were no synapse creatures among the vanguard swarm so far as we could tell,<sup>131</sup> which meant that the rest of the broods roaming the desert would be unaware of the fate of their compatriots. It was still possible that some might stumble across the pheromone trail left by the deceased lictor, but Tyrie's men had set sentries, so we would have some warning of their approach and sufficient firepower to prevail against all but the largest of swarms. I can't claim that I slept easily that night, but I certainly managed a good deal better than I'd expected, despite sharing a habitent with Jurgen, whose snores dislodged constant minor sandfalls from the surrounding dunes.<sup>132</sup> The filtered air within went a long way towards restoring my spirits too. Even adulterated as it was by the presence of my aide, it was a big improvement over the muck I'd been forced to breathe outside, and the dull ache in my chest receded for the first time since our overly heavy landing.

Accordingly, having breakfasted on a couple of ration bars and enough tepid water to slake my thirst, I re-tied the much-abused sash around my face with some reluctance, and crawled outside to face the tainted air.

'Better take this,' Tyrie greeted me, holding out one of the breather masks he and his men were equipped with. I took it at once, despite the knowledge that it had come from one of the casualties of the skirmish the night before,<sup>133</sup> slipped the straps over my head, and inhaled gratefully. The

filtered air was overlaid with the smell of rubber and stale sweat, but that was a small price to pay for being able to breathe without pain, and I restored what was left of my sash to its customary position around my waist.

‘Thank you,’ I said, my voice sounding muffled in my ears, and did my best to shrug the filter unit into place across my shoulders. After watching me squirming ineffectually for a moment, Tyrie stepped in and adjusted it, without a word. ‘Much obliged.’

The ridemaster shrugged. ‘Orders are to get you there in one piece,’ he told me, already turning aside.

‘And where’s “there”, exactly?’ I asked, falling into step beside him, and cocking my head at an odd angle to keep him centred in the breather’s limited field of view. For someone as paranoid as I am, being deprived of my peripheral vision was distinctly unnerving.

‘Where you were going in the first place,’ Tyrie told me, as though it should have been obvious. ‘Mechanicus shrine.’

Which was mixed news indeed. Now that the first assault on our fleet in orbit had been beaten off,<sup>134</sup> a swift return to the flagship, getting as far away as possible from the tyranids still polluting the planet’s surface, was looking distinctly attractive. On the other hand, Sholer and Kildhar were expecting me, and there was still the little matter of their menagerie to deal with. Probably my best option would be to find out what they were up to as quickly as possible, while Jurgen went looking for whatever orbit-capable vessels might be sitting around on the pad, and requisitioned one. I could plausibly claim an urgent need to report back to the Lord General, and the state of my uniform would speak for itself. I’d seen more savoury-looking Nurgle cultists than the apparition which stared back at me from every reflective surface.

‘How soon can we get there?’ I asked, practically salivating at the prospect of the hot meal and mug of recaff waiting for me at our destination. Even soylens viridiens seemed palatable right about now.

Tyrie shrugged, and reached up to pat the neck of a horse, which was gazing into the middle distance with an air of patient boredom, which at least reassured me there weren’t any more ’nids in the immediate vicinity. ‘That depends,’ he said, glancing at me sideways through the lenses of his breather. ‘How fast can you ride?’

By and large, my attitude to riding animals can best be described as distantly cordial. I've never had an active antipathy to the brutes, but I've always inclined to the view that if the Emperor intended us to get around in such a manner He'd never have given us the AFV.<sup>135</sup> The number of occasions on which I've been forced to rely on so archaic a form of transport have been few and far between, and it took me some time to get used to the curious rocking sensation of the horse beneath me, uncannily reminiscent of a small boat in a gentle swell. After the first hour or so I was beginning to feel some considerable discomfort in the posterior, but I was damned if I was going to admit the fact. I had no doubt my tight grip on the reins, and continual swaying as I tried to retain my balance, was affording the experienced horsemen around me enough amusement as it was. Fortunately the full-face masks they wore were enough to conceal their expressions, so we could all pretend to be dignified, but the contrast with their own relaxed postures was telling.

To add to my discomfiture, Jurgen seemed hardly less at ease in the saddle than they were, guiding his own mount with faint nudges of the knees as easily as if he rode a horse every day. He moved up to flank me, taking me by surprise, since the breathers we were wearing not only restricted my field of vision, but robbed me of my usual olfactory warning of his approach. 'Making good time,' he said.

'I suppose so,' I responded. The truth was, the monotonous landscape was so dulling my senses that I had no idea how far we'd come, or how far we had still to go. We'd left the crash site shortly after sun-up, following a set of coordinates in Tyrie's map slate which I hoped would soon bring the blocky mass of Regio Quinquaginta Unus into sight, but so far all I'd seen was the endless undulating sand, and the looming rockcrete ramparts of the distant hive. The pall of dust above the impact site where the bio-ship had met its end had dissipated overnight in the endless desert wind, but I could see nothing of its fate from this distance, and wasn't about to suggest diverting to take a closer look; Throne alone knew what horrors awaited us there. Besides, the sooner we got to the Mechanicus shrine, the sooner I'd be able to find out what was going on. I'd already been out of contact for nearly twenty-four hours,<sup>136</sup> and a day's a long time in a war zone. Practically anything could have happened, none of it good, and I tried not to dwell on the worst-case scenarios.

'These are a lot easier to ride than those sloth things,' Jurgen remarked,

and I nodded; hanging on to the saddles strapped to their stomachs for dear life while our panicked mounts clambered, dangling, from the boughs of one kilometre-high tree to another, was not one of my happier memories.<sup>137</sup>

‘Definitely,’ I agreed, not really in the mood for conversation, but happy to seize on any distraction from the physical discomfort of my throbbing fundament. Before we could lose ourselves in happy reminiscences of bowel-clenching terror long past, however, Tyrie held up his pennant-tipped lance to halt the column.

‘Something’s out there,’ he said, raising a hand to shade his eyes; a possibly futile gesture, as the lenses of his breather had polarised, like mine and everyone else’s, converting them into small, round mirrors, in which I could see myself and the rest of our column reflected.

‘Amplivisor, sir?’ Jurgen offered, leaning at what seemed to me a reckless angle to proffer them. Trying not to look like a complete bluefoot,<sup>138</sup> and praying to the Throne that I didn’t topple off the nag’s back in the process, I took them, a little unsteadily, and raised them to my eyes, only to find that the breather’s lenses kept them too distant to focus.

Tyrie glanced back at me, in manifest disbelief, probably grateful that I couldn’t see his expression. ‘Magnification’s built in,’ he said.

‘Right,’ I said, stuffing the amplivisor in a convenient pocket. After a few moments fumbling, I worked out how to manipulate the lenses of the breather, and the dune field in the middle distance suddenly expanded to fill my vision.

‘Better adjust it back when you’re done,’ Tyrie counselled, ‘or you’ll be falling over your own feet when you dismount.’

‘What is it?’ I asked, trying to make sense of what we were looking at. Something was definitely there, half-buried in the drifting sand, and what I could see of it was ridged and rounded, like plates of tyranid chitin. Not a creature, though, it was too still for that. ‘A dead spore?’

‘Looks like,’ Tyrie agreed. ‘It’s close to our route, so we can check it out as we pass.’

‘I’m more worried about what it delivered,’ I told him. ‘We’ve already seen a lictor, and ’stealers, as well as the gaunts.’

‘Whatever it is, we’ll kill it,’ Tyrie said. ‘Unless we already did.’ He gestured with his lance again. ‘Move out.’

Tyrie’s confidence notwithstanding, I kept a sharp lookout as our mounts

plodded onwards, paying particular attention to the downed mycetic spore in the distance every time we crested another dune and it came back into view. I had no doubt that its baleful cargo would have long since scattered in search of prey, perhaps even becoming part of the swarm which had attacked us the previous night, but that didn't stop me from dialling the lenses to their greatest magnification and sweeping the area around it in search of movement. Something about that dark and silent bulk struck me as ominous, although I couldn't have put my finger on what. Perhaps it was simply that the desolate emptiness all around us was making me feel uncomfortably exposed, which concentrated my attention on the only visible evidence of an enemy presence.

'Any sign of movement?' I asked, and Tyrie glanced at his portable auspex, before shaking his head.

'Not a thing,' he told me. Which might be good news, or it might not; tyranids weren't that easy to detect at the best of times, and I doubted that Kildhar's adjustments would have filtered their way down to individual pieces of field kit. So far as I knew, the handful of tech-priests capable of understanding and duplicating them were still working flat out on the sensoria suites of the warships in orbit.<sup>139</sup> If another lictor was lying in ambush beneath the sand, we'd have no more than a second or two's warning before it struck.

'Good,' I said, grateful for the ease with which the breather hid my disquiet. By now we were close enough to make the thing out without the aid of the magnifiers, although that didn't stop me from taking full advantage of the vision enhancement in any case. The spore was half-buried, inevitably, given the constant drift of the wind-driven sand, but that didn't make it any the less repugnant. If anything, it simply reinforced the impression of some malignant cancer erupting from the body of the planet.

'It's definitely split,' Jurgen said, studying the thing as carefully as I was. 'But not all the way.'

'Perhaps it was damaged on the way down,' I said, noting the telltale signs of cauterisation on the fleshier parts, and calcification of its outer armour. For whatever reason it had tumbled on the way down,<sup>140</sup> being more or less evenly toasted, instead of bearing the brunt of the atmospheric friction on the ablative sheets of chitin intended to protect its soft tissue and whatever ghastly creatures it contained.

'We'd best check it out,' Tyrie said, changing direction slightly to take us

directly towards it. I could have overruled him, of course, citing the urgency of my errand, but, despite my misgivings, I was reluctant to. I had a reputation to maintain, however little I actually deserved it, and had no doubt that my ineptitude astride the horse had already afforded the death riders a fair amount of amusement at my expense. It wouldn't hurt to remind them that I was supposed to be a Hero of the Imperium, despite my subjectively scorching saddle, and any apparent reluctance to put myself in harm's way would hardly help with that. Besides, the thing was bound to be dead by now.

'Better had,' I agreed, the ridemaster's laconic conversational style proving surprisingly contagious,<sup>141</sup> surreptitiously taking advantage of my widely-perceived ineptitude in the saddle to fall a little behind the others. Dormant or not, there was no point in being the first to get near the spore when I had a troop of riders to hide behind.

As we got within a score or so metres of it, I began to appreciate the scale of the thing for the first time, all the previous examples I'd seen having been from a far safer distance. (Which was hardly surprising, as they'd been vomiting out swarms of malevolent creatures hell-bent on killing me, for the most part, and getting this close would have entailed hacking my way through them instead of following my natural inclination to move rapidly in the general direction of away.) Even on horseback, it still towered at least twice my height, an obscene outcrop of necrotising flesh, only the breather protecting me from the charnel stench of its decomposition.

'Looks deserted,' Jurgen said, unslinging the melta from his back anyway, a precaution I heartily approved of. I found myself straining my ears over the muffled plodding of my mount's hooves in the sand, alert for any signs of ambush, but the horde of gaunts I expected to erupt from it failed to materialise. Perhaps Tyrie was right, and they were long gone, or they'd failed to survive the fiery descent from the upper atmosphere.

Spurred by that thought, I adjusted the breather's inbuilt optics to maximum magnification, and examined as much as I could see of the organism's interior through the slits in its carapace intended to let the occupants disembark. Fortunately the sun was perfectly angled to allow a shaft of light within, so I was spared the frustration of attempting to come to grips with whatever image enhancers might also have been installed in the mask's eyepieces. Sure enough, I could make out the slumped forms of several gaunts, the congealed remains of bodily fluids seeping from joints

in their carapaces, baked and swollen tongues lolling from their distended jaws.

‘There are gaunts inside,’ I called,<sup>142</sup> feeling it was time to make a show of actively participating in this fool’s errand. Another few minutes, and we could resume our progress towards a shower and a mug of recaff with a gratifying sense of duty done. ‘Definitely dead.’

‘Best sort,’ Jurgen added, sentiments with which I was in complete agreement.

I began fumbling with the optic control, trying to restore normal vision, but the wretched thing seemed to be stuck, probably due to a few grains of sand embedded in something vital. I banged it with the heel of my hand, in the fashion I’d seen tech-priests use with recalcitrant devices, and muttered a few half-remembered phrases from the Litany of Percussive Maintenance which they generally employed on such occasions. The Omnissiah obviously felt I deserved a few marks for effort, because my vision abruptly snapped back to the way it should be. A moment before it did, though, the shaking, magnified image had swept across the surface of the spore, and I was certain I’d seen a quiver of movement somewhere among the half-melted cluster spines protruding from its back.

‘Incoming!’ I shouted, heedless of the possibility of making a fool of myself. If the thing hadn’t quite expired yet, and registered our presence, it would respond instinctively, and even damaged as they were, the spines would be enough to shred us. As I spoke I turned the horse’s head, and kicked it in the ribs, not far from where the thick tubes pumping nutrients and whatever else enabled it to survive out here into its bloodstream entered the skin. It broke into a trot, which nearly unseated me, Jurgen’s mount cantering a few paces to catch up before he slowed it enough to ride abreast.

With a crackle like a brushfire incinerating a bush, the spines arced through the air, bursting among the riders and fragmenting into a thousand razor-edged fragments which lacerated man and mount alike. A couple of horses fell, shrieking behind their breathing masks, until the chemical regulators shot them full of analgesics, and they stopped caring about the speckling of open wounds through which their lifeblood was leaking out into the thirsty sand. Most of the men were scarcely better off, but, true to the traditions of the Death Korps, paid no attention to their injuries, going to ground instead, their weapons levelled. In any other terrain, and if the spore hadn’t been in such a bad way itself, able to launch no more than a tithe of



its bristling armament, they'd probably have been wiped out to a man<sup>143</sup> on the instant. As it was, the drifted sand absorbed the larger part of the chitinous flechettes.

'Thanks for the heads-up,' Tyrie said, without any noticeable sarcasm that I could detect, his voice carrying easily in the quiet desert air. Belated as my warning had been, it had probably saved a few lives, as the riders had responded instantly to it by beginning to dismount. Had they not done so, they would have been above the majority of the sand ridges, unprotected from the cluster spine barrage. Hanging back had saved Jurgan and I from the worst of it, too, the pair of us, ironically, being the only two still mounted.

'Mind your eyes, sir,' Jurgan said, turning in the saddle to heave the bulk of his melta around. A second or so later the familiar eye-stabbing flash, muted by the polarised lenses of the breather, sparked, reducing the remaining spines to a charred ruin. My horse flinched, and I braced myself, expecting it to shy or rear in panic, but it calmed itself at once, by virtue of its training and the cocktail of chemicals sluicing through its system. 'Don't want it having another go.'

'Indeed we don't,' I agreed, turning myself to take a look back at the scene of confusion around the spore. The distinctive sound of las-fire was crackling in the air by now, although for the life of me I couldn't see what there was left for the Death Korps troopers to shoot at: the gaunts inside were all dead anyway, and lasguns would be completely ineffective against the vast slabs of chitin protecting them.

Almost at once I had my answer, as the sand beneath my mount's hooves churned, like wavelets in a choppy sea, making it stumble. This time it did rear, or tried to, throwing me from its back. I landed heavily and rolled clear, fearful of being trampled, but its front feet were being held by something sinuous and sinister, thrashing back and forth as the whinnying horse bucked frantically, trying to pull itself free. Then another tentacle burst from the sand, wrapping almost instantly around the desperate equine, the barbs along its length tearing jagged wounds in the horse's flanks as it constricted. With a loud *crack*, the charger's spine snapped, and its ribcage imploded. Still flailing in its death throes, my mount was dragged beneath the sand.

'It's trying to feed!' I shouted, glancing frantically around for any more telltale movement in the grains beneath my feet. Whether it was attempting



to garner enough biomass to grow more cluster spines, or simply lashing out with its tentacles because it had detected our presence<sup>144</sup> I had no idea, nor, at that moment, did I care.

‘Hang on, sir, I’m coming!’ Jurgen called back, trying to regain control of his understandably skittish mount. My skin crawling, anticipating the strike of another subterranean tentacle at any moment, I drew my chainsword, thumbing the speed control up to maximum. The full-throated roar of a flamer, and the *crump* of exploding grenades behind me provided a little welcome reassurance that the Death Korps were still in the fight, but given their fondness for glorious last stands I couldn’t count on their aid any time soon. ‘Behind you!’ my aide added, and I whipped round, to find one of the serpentine forms already lashing out at me.

Cursing the restricted field of vision left by the breather, I brought my blade up to meet it, slicing through the sinuous limb in a single fluid movement. All that seemed to do was confirm the presence of more prey within reach, however, as another three or four metres of it immediately extruded from the sand, spraying ichor from its tip like promethium from a flamer as it came. Foul, sticky fluid slathered my much-abused greatcoat, and caught me full in the face. Blessing the Emperor for the protection of the breather, I wiped the goggles as best I could with the fingers of my empty hand, restoring a measure of blurry vision and imparting an ineradicable stain to my glove just in time to see another couple of tentacles attempting to coil around me from opposite directions while the original struck from above. I lopped through the left-hand one, opening up enough space to evade the other two in a renewed welter of repulsive fluid, and turned to cut them all into a selection of chunks longer than my leg with a flurry of multiple blows.

‘Stay back!’ I called to Jurgen, who had his horse back under control now, and seemed on the point of charging down the slope they were perched on in an almost certainly doomed attempt to pluck me to safety. Not that I had any objection to being rescued, you understand, quite the reverse, but the fact that they hadn’t yet suffered the fate of my own mount could only mean they were beyond the reach of the spore’s tentacles. If my aide attempted to move any closer, though, he and the horse would become fuel for its bioweapon, and I’d lose the best chance I had of getting out of this alive. ‘Use the melta on any movement you see!’

‘Right you are, sir,’ Jurgen responded, with his usual brisk cheerfulness,

and set to with a will, creating patches of steaming glass wherever the melta beam hit. Rather too many of them were close at hand for my liking, but after the first few shots I was pretty confident I could gauge the maximum reach of the ghastly thing, and was heartened to discover I was no more than a short sprint from safety.

To think was to act, and I ran for the sandbank atop which Jurgen was perched as though Abaddon himself was after me, laying about with the chainsword at every foul appendage which dared to break the surface too close at hand for my aide to risk a shot. Within seconds, although it seemed far longer at the time, I was trying to scramble up the slope without letting go of the weapon, while Jurgen called encouragement from the crest. 'Keep it up, sir!' he urged. 'You're almost there!' His words were punctuated by the flash and sizzle of the melta.

At which point something snagged my ankle and tugged hard, only the robust construction of my Guard-issue boot protecting the flesh beneath from serious injury. It seemed the spore had learned to keep its tentacles hidden beneath the surface,<sup>145</sup> and was making a last-ditch attempt to take its revenge. I slashed down with the chainsword, but only managed to raise a fountain of sand, the snaring tentacle armoured from retaliation by the depth of the dune. Another tug, and my leg disappeared to the knee, with a wrench which almost dislocated it.

'Hold on, sir!' Jurgen called again, leaping from his saddle and slithering down the dune in a spray of fine powder. Without thought or hesitation he grabbed my free hand, and leaned back, pulling with all his might. 'I've got you!'

'So's the bloody spore!' I snarled, as, between them, both leg and arm felt ready to detach from their sockets. Brute force was never going to overcome the hideous thing, although my aide's painful and well-intentioned intervention might have bought me a few more seconds, the pair of us were never going to break its grip on my foot. If I was to avoid the fate of my ill-starred steed, there was only one option left open to me. I took a deep breath, and angled the chainsword for what I hoped was going to be a swift, clean cut. 'Have you still got the medipack?'

'Of course.' Jurgen nodded, not really understanding the question.

'Good.' I took a deep breath, wondering if I could really go through with this, then decided I most definitely could, given the alternative. I already had a couple of augmetic fingers, after all; a new leg shouldn't be that hard

to get used to. 'I'd be obliged if you could get it out ready.'

'Of course, sir,' he responded, the coin dropping, and letting go of my arm to start rummaging in his collection of pouches. 'Would you like a local analgesic?'

Very much, as it happened, but I shook my head. 'No time,' I told him, and raised the spinning blade.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## TWENTY

Before I could bring the blade down, though, the ground shook beneath me, staying my hand. I'd like to say I hesitated because I had no wish to botch the cut, making the surgeon's job any more difficult than it needed to be, but in truth it was simply because I was taken completely by surprise. A fast-moving shadow suddenly swept across us, trailed by the banshee keening of powerful turbines, and I glanced up to see the silhouette of a Space Marine Land Speeder stark against the sky. Before I could make out any more than the distinctive yellow and white livery favoured by the Reclaimers, however, the wind of its passage struck, shrouding Jorgen, his horse and I in a small but very determined sandstorm.

By the time our vision cleared, its pilot had banked round, impossibly fast and tight, in a turn which would have rendered a normal man unconscious or worse, and was howling in again on a second attack run. This time I saw a flurry of warheads streak from the missile pod bolted to its side,<sup>146</sup> to impact squarely on the looming bulk of the spore, the armour of which was already shattered from the explosion I'd felt reverberating through the ground. At the same time, the gunner kept up a steady stream of fire from his heavy bolter, chewing up the exposed flesh within, an astonishing display of accuracy given the speed at which they were moving.

Suddenly, the obscene pile of engineered flesh collapsed in on itself like a fire-gutted building, and, at the same time, I felt the vice-like grip around my ankle slacken its hold. Dropping the chainsword, I took hold of my calf in both hands, and pulled, as hard as I could. To my relief, my foot came

free, with an abruptness which dumped me suddenly on the burning hot sand.<sup>147</sup>

‘That was lucky,’ Jurgen remarked, in his usual phlegmatic manner, extending a hand to help me to my feet as he spoke.

‘It was,’ I agreed, for want of anything else to say, and bent to retrieve my fallen weapon. There seemed little doubt that the spore was finally dead after a mauling like that, but I’d had enough unpleasant surprises for one day, and had no intention of taking any more chances. My aide clearly felt the same, because he kept his melta cradled ready for use, and his lasgun slung where he could take hold of that instead if he needed it in a hurry. Then the obvious question occurred to me. ‘But what are they doing here?’

‘Looking for us?’ Jurgen suggested, unable, as ever, to recognise a rhetorical question when he heard one, and endeavouring to answer it to the best of his ability.

‘That hardly seems likely,’ I said, fiddling with the comm-bead in my ear, and scanning rapidly through the frequencies in an attempt to find out. The Adeptus Astartes were the finest warriors the Imperium possessed, and, irrespective of any residual goodwill I might have retained from our previous association, were hardly likely to be frittering their time away supporting a search and rescue operation which the Guard already had well in hand. Which, in turn, reminded me... ‘We’d better go and find out if there are any of the Death Korps left.’

Which there were, Tyrie greeting us with a somewhat weary wave as we hobbled over the crest of the dune concealing them from view; between the ravages of the tentacle and the saddle I could barely walk at all. The ridemaster and his squad seemed as chipper as possible under the circumstances, going about the business of tending to their wounds and recapturing their mounts with brisk efficiency, although I counted fewer heads than I remembered, and even fewer of the horses, but then his regiment wasn’t exactly renowned for excessive displays of emotion. ‘Thought we’d lost you,’ he said.

‘So did I,’ I replied, determined to seem equally stoic. ‘And you would have done, if it hadn’t been for them.’ I gestured up at the Land Speeder, which was still circling dementedly above us like a raptor on stimms, albeit at a far more sedate pace than hitherto. Then I broke off, as I finally heard a voice in the comm-bead, as deep and resonant as only a Space Marine could be.

‘Two more survivors joining the others now. One of them looks like a commissar.’

‘Could it be Cain?’ a new voice cut in, taking me completely by surprise. It was unusual enough to hear a normal human on an Adeptus Astartes commnet at all, let alone a woman.

‘It could,’ I said, joining the conversation. ‘I’m sorry to be a little late for our meeting, magos, but I was unexpectedly detained.’ In truth, the voice might have belonged to anyone, but I knew the Reclaimers only had male Chapter serfs,<sup>148</sup> and there couldn’t be many among their Mechanicus hosts the Space Marines had taken that far into their confidence. Given how closely Sholer and Kildhar had been collaborating on their research, it hadn’t been all that hard to guess precisely who I’d been listening to.

‘Commissar,’ Kildhar replied, failing dismally to prevent her astonishment from colouring her voice, however hard she was trying to keep it free of any emotional overtones. ‘I must confess we’d feared the worst. The Lord General will be gratified. He remained confident of your survival, even though I assured him the odds were considerably weighted against it.’

‘Probably because he knows more about me than the odds do,’ I said. Then, conscious that I had a reputation for understated modesty to maintain, I belatedly added, ‘but it was a narrow enough squeak, I have to say.’ I looked around at the handful of death riders, and the inadequate supply of mounts they now seemed to have brought under control. ‘I’m afraid it looks as though I still won’t be joining you for quite a while yet.’ If anything, it seemed, the rest of our journey was going to be even more arduous than it had been up to this point.

‘Don’t worry,’ Kildhar assured me. ‘We’ll pick you up on our way back.’

‘Way back from where?’ I asked, feeling the familiar premonitory tingling in the palms of my hands. I could think of only one place in this hideous wilderness liable to tempt the magos biologists out of the comfortable fastness of Regio Quinquaginta Unus, and that would certainly require an escort of Space Marines to venture near, but surely even Kildhar couldn’t be as imbecilic as all that.

‘The bio-ship crash site, of course,’ she said, at once confirming that she could. ‘We recovered some excellent specimens. Apothecary Sholer and I are eager to examine them as soon as we return.’

‘Good luck with that,’ I said, beginning to think sharing the back end of a horse with Jurgen for the next day or two might not be so bad after all.

‘I’m sure the Omnissiah will guide our understanding,’ she replied, as immune to sarcasm as most of her kind. Finding nothing else to say, I trotted out a few of the rote-learned platitudes that had come in handy so often in my line of work, and prepared to break contact. ‘Stay where you are,’ she added, just before I did so. ‘The Land Speeder can see you clearly, and will guide us in.’ Easy for her to say, of course, she’d probably appreciate the view of the now definitely deceased spore, but I must confess I found the idea of remaining so close to something which had almost killed me to be rather less appealing.

On the other hand, having a pair of heavily armed Adeptus Astartes keeping an eye on me from an altitude sufficient to spot an approaching threat from at least ten kilometres away was distinctly appealing, so, ‘I’ll be waiting,’ I assured her, only realising that I should have asked for an ETA a second or two after I’d broken contact.

In the event, I had less time to wait than I’d expected. Barely an hour had gone by, during which Jurgen and I endured the foul air as briefly as possible to fortify ourselves with another ration bar and a swallow or two of water apiece, before I once again felt a faint tremor in the sand, and saw a few loose grains begin to slip down the steepest slopes. After my encounters with the tentacles, and the buried lictor, this hardly seemed encouraging, and my hands fell automatically to the weapons at my belt. Jurgen, too, seemed a little nervous, and reached for his lasgun, eschewing the greater firepower of the melta for now. I didn’t draw my pistol or chainsword this time, however; the Land Speeder would surely have spotted any obvious threat, and the hive fleet didn’t seem to have dispatched any burrowing organisms in the first wave<sup>149</sup> which they might have missed.

Gradually, the vibration increased, the sandfalls growing both in number and intensity, while the horses shifted and pawed the ground uneasily. Tyrie and his death riders seemed unconcerned, their resolve being both bone deep and pharmacologically enhanced, but I noticed they kept their weapons to hand all the same. After a few moments I began to hear a new sound, the growl of a powerful engine and the creak and rattle of vehicle tracks, and my spirits rose. Despite the problems the Guard had found getting Chimeras to work in this unforgiving terrain, the Fecundians had doubtless found ways to resolve them, the locally built vehicles being a lot more reliable. So thinking, I envisaged something like an APC or a Trojan



cargo hauler, perhaps with broader treads for better traction on the shifting sand, but essentially something akin to the transports I was familiar with.

The sound, however, continued to build, the horses becoming ever more spooked, and, I must confess, I could hardly blame them. I could feel the vibration in my bones now, and the noise of the engine was getting so loud that I had to raise my voice to converse with Jurgen. If it increased much more, I'd have to rely on the comm-bead instead.

'That must be it,' he said, pointing towards a dark mass which had appeared above the dunes, growing steadily larger as it approached us almost head on.

I nodded. 'Seems roomy enough,' I said. Its upper hull had the familiar blocky silhouette I generally associated with Imperial vehicles, although something about its proportions seemed wrong, in a manner I couldn't quite put my finger on. Then it struck me. A vehicle large enough to be visible above the dune should be tilting by now, as it climbed the far slope, but it was still rumbling inexorably towards us, straight and level. 'Just how big is that thing?' I voxed.

'Big enough,' Kildhar assured me, a faint trace of amusement entering her voice in spite of her best efforts. 'We adapted one of the dust harvesters,<sup>150</sup> to make sure we had enough room for an adequate cross section of samples.'

'You certainly seem to have that,' I agreed, as the scale of the gargantuan vehicle gradually became clearer. It wasn't anything like the size of a Titan, but it certainly seemed that way, looming over us like a hab block on multiple tracks which, as I'd surmised, were broad enough to spread its colossal weight enough to prevent it from sinking deep into the sand. I was reminded of the snowliner I'd travelled on, and taken refuge beneath, on *Nusquam Fundumentibus*, although this leviathan dwarfed even that, eclipsing the sun overhead as it rolled to a stop beside us. Somewhere far overhead a cargo hatch popped open, extruding a derrick, and a working party dressed from head to foot in environmental suits appeared from somewhere to begin hoisting whatever bits they could find of the spore which had almost killed us up to the open port.

'We made the best of what we had,' Kildhar agreed, her voice taking on a curious echoing quality, as the real thing caught up with the facsimile in my comm-bead after taking the scenic route through the intervening air. She was standing in a doorway above one of the tread units, about four metres



from the ground, from which a boarding ramp was descending towards us.

‘Can we drop you somewhere?’ I asked Tyrie, feeling it was the least we could do after all the trouble we’d caused him, and the ridemaster shook his head.

‘We’d rather ride,’ he said, which didn’t surprise me. He swung into the saddle and led his men over the crest of the dunes without another word. Just before disappearing, he turned and raised a hand in farewell, then the desert swallowed him, as though he’d never been. Only the tracks of the horses remained to attest to his presence, and they were already being smoothed by the wind. A few more minutes, and even those last tenuous traces would be gone.

‘Odd fellow,’ Kildhar said, strolling down the ramp to join us. ‘But evidently blessed by the Machine-God nonetheless.’ After a moment’s puzzlement, I realised her augmented vision must have revealed the network of chemical injectors and other subcutaneous alterations common to a member of the Death Korps.

‘The Emperor certainly sent him our way in the nick of time,’ Jurgen agreed. ‘And those Adeptus Astartes.’ He bestowed a baleful look on the thoroughly macerated spore, which by now was dangling from a heavy duty cargo sling, preparatory to being swung aboard. ‘That thing would have killed the commissar if they hadn’t bombed it.’

I didn’t want to think too hard about that, so I smiled at Kildhar, not that much of an effort, given the circumstances of her arrival. ‘I’m surprised you want it,’ I said, flippantly. ‘I’d expect you to be after a live one.’

‘We’ve already got one of those,’ she said, completely serious so far as I could tell, and, once again, I found myself questioning her sanity. ‘But this specimen will be more convenient for chemical rendering.’

‘If you say so,’ I agreed, feeling it best to humour her, at least until I’d had a decent meal and a bath. My uniform was probably beyond salvage, but I could always get one sent down from my quarters aboard the flagship, and one for my aide while I was about it, although it would take more than a change of attire to improve Jurgen’s appearance to any noticeable degree. ‘I take it your examination of the crash site was fruitful?’

‘Very,’ Kildhar assured me, turning to lead the way aboard the huge crawler. The feel of hard metal underfoot, after slogging through shifting sand for so long, was an immense relief, although my thigh and calf muscles burned as we climbed the ramp, beginning to match the discomfort

higher up. 'We obtained a great many tissue samples from the remains of the bio-ship, and a respectable number of motile specimens too.'

I had no need to ask what she meant by 'motile specimens', as that became obvious the moment we came aboard. Almost the entire lower deck of the growling leviathan had been converted into stout cages, high and wide enough to have confined a carnifex if anyone had been foolish enough to try, and a pack of hormagaunts flung themselves at the bars the moment we appeared. Remembering how easily they'd torn open the Aquila's cockpit to get at the pilot, I flinched and reached for my weapons, but they fell back at once, amid a crackle of energetic discharge.

'Are you sure that's enough to keep them confined?' I asked, and Kildhar nodded, in the slightly stiff fashion of most tech-priests making the effort to resurrect half-remembered body language.

'It should be,' she assured me. 'If they were being directed by the hive mind they'd keep attacking the barrier until they'd made a breach in it, but alone they're driven by instinct, not reason. Their self-preservation cuts in, and they break off.'

'What about the deck?' I asked. 'You can't keep that electrified. They'd just fry.' Which, come to think of it, sounded fine to me.

'Precisely what we are doing,' Kildhar said. 'The cages have a false floor, made of non-conductive material. If they break through that, they get a jolt from the charged one underneath. The ceiling carries a current too, although I don't see how they could reach it.'

'Very thorough,' I said, wishing I found that thoroughness reassuring. The digestion pools of the hive fleets were full of people who'd been equally confident of their precautions against the tyrannids, and I had no wish to join them. But, for the moment at least, the creatures seemed confined, so I'd just have to suppress my misgivings as best I could. 'Is Sholer aboard too?'

'No.' Kildhar shook her head, with a little more confidence this time. 'Our research is at a crucial stage, and he felt it best to remain in the analyticum with the off-world specimens.'

'At least those aren't trying to bite anyone's face off,' I said, following her up an echoing metal staircase at the end of the chamber. Once on the upper decks, to my unspoken relief, she turned towards the crew quarters, instead of suggesting we take a look at the still living spore she'd alluded to, as I half feared she might.

'They hadn't when I left,' she said, which was hardly encouraging,

although I supposed if anything from the freezer got out of hand the Apothecary would be more than capable of taking care of it. ‘But then hardly any of them had revived.’

I felt a sudden lurch in the pit of my stomach, which might have been due to the vast vehicle getting under way again, although somehow I doubted that. ‘How many were you trying to revive?’ I asked, trying to keep my voice level.

‘Only a handful of the less dangerous ones,’ Kildhar said, as though there was any such thing where tyranids were concerned. ‘As we had the opportunity to acquire some live specimens of this generation, I felt it might be instructive to have some of the historical ones active to run some comparative tests on.’

‘And Sholer went along with this?’ I asked, scarcely able to keep the shock and horror from my voice.

Kildhar was definitely improving at the nodding thing, probably due to the practice she was getting. ‘He took a little persuading,’ she said, ‘but I was able to convince him the risk was slight.’ Maybe she really did think that, but this was a woman who’d been keeping genestealers as house pets for the last sixty years, so I could hardly be blamed for finding her advice on safety matters a little less than reliable.

‘I hope they’re more secure than your ‘stealers were,’ I said, a little more waspishly than I’d intended,<sup>151</sup> but the magos didn’t seem to take offence at the remark.

‘All possible precautions are being taken,’ she said, leading us into the lounge area where the harvester crew could rest between shifts. I have no idea how many would normally be on board,<sup>152</sup> but there were a couple of good-sized dining tables at one end, next to a galley from which appetising aromas seeped, displacing the rather more earthy one of my aide.<sup>153</sup> Come to that, I probably didn’t smell all that fresh myself. Luckily the only other people in sight were cogboys, who’d probably had their sense of smell removed as surplus to requirements, or labourers so used to working on the surface that Jurgen and I were no more olfactorily offensive than everything else in their daily routines. All of them gave us a wide berth, which was fine by me;<sup>154</sup> right then I was in no mood for idle conversation, and remained so until I’d got outside a plate of something hot and steaming, and enough recaff to float a small battleship.

Kildhar disappeared as soon as Jurgen and I were ensconced with our

rations, no doubt eager to resume poking hormagaunts with sticks, or whatever else it was she got up to with them, leaving us to eat in peace. I can't pretend either of us felt particularly deprived of her company, but once I was feeling reasonably human again I tapped the comm-bead and asked where she was, partly because I was feeling robust enough for a proper briefing now, and partly because I didn't entirely trust her out of my sight for too long.

'I'm on the control deck,' she informed me, much to my surprise, as I'd have wagered pretty heavily that she wouldn't be parted from her precious specimens under any circumstances. She then compounded my astonishment by giving me quick, concise directions to the location, which my aide and I lost no further time in following.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## TWENTY-ONE

The control deck was on the highest level of the great machine, and was fronted by an armourglass window taller than I was, allowing its captain a panoramic view of the landscape across which it was travelling. I can't deny that the sight was a spectacular one, the barren desert undulating beneath us like an ocean of sand so far below that we might almost have been flying, like the Reclaimers' Land Speeder, which kept circling us at about the same height.<sup>155</sup> From up here, I could see clear to the distant hive, or back the other way to the curve of the horizon, where the low-lying haze of a far-off sandstorm echoed the slabbed ramparts of the habs and manufactoria like a phantom mirror.

'Hard to believe something that size and so solid could ever fall,' Yail said, as I gazed thoughtfully at the looming ranges of serried rockrete. He was back in his Terminator armour, which showed several new gouges in the ceramite, and towered over everyone else in the echoing chamber as he strode majestically through the quincunx of control lecterns between us, the thralls manning them scuttling out of his way like nervous sump rats; and who, in all honesty, could blame them?

'We both know it will, if the 'nids get enough organisms on the ground,' I told him, and he nodded.

'True,' he rumbled. 'With tyranids, it's always about the numbers.' For a moment my imagination filled the sand below us with teeming horrors, and I shuddered at the idea, before Yail went on with quiet confidence. 'With us, however, it's strategy, and our faith in the Golden Throne. I know which I'd

rather rely on.'

'Well said,' I agreed, because it's always wise to concur with over two metres of genetically enhanced super-warrior encased in the toughest power armour known to man.

'I prefer to rely on the power of the intellect,' Kildhar said, ambling over after concluding her conversation with the landship's captain. Whatever the substance of it, he seemed far from happy. 'Surely the most powerful weapon with which the Ommissiah has seen fit to gift us.'

'One you're clearly better fitted to wield than I,' I told her, since it probably wouldn't help to express my true opinion at this juncture. 'How are your researches progressing?' As soon as I finished speaking, I realised my mistake. I've never yet met a tech-priest who didn't take a generalised enquiry of that nature as an excuse to launch into a detailed exposition of their particular obsession. If they've got augmetic lungs or a vox-coder they don't even need to pause for breath, and can drone on for hours,<sup>156</sup> but fortunately Kildhar had neither, and I was able to get a word in after only a couple of minutes. If my eyes glazed over in the interim, I was at least able to plead fatigue from our trek across the desert, although I doubted she'd even noticed. 'In terms a layman can understand,' I added, at the first opportunity.

The qualification seemed to take her completely aback, and she stopped babbling to stare at me blankly, like a servitor faced with a problem not covered by its programming. 'We're following up several promising lines of enquiry,' she told me after a prolonged pause.

'Such as?' I prompted.

'The sub-molecular re-alignment of neurotransmitters in the brain tissue of organisms under the direction of the hive mind offers some intriguing possibilities,' she offered at last. 'Of course it's difficult to reproduce these conditions in the analyticum, without thawing out the hive node recovered from Nusquam Fundamentibus, but Apothecary Sholer is adamant that we should not attempt to do so.' This last in a faintly pettish tone, which made me strongly suspect that she'd been advocating just this course of action, and been overruled in no uncertain terms. Clearly Sholer was by far the less reckless of the two, and, despite my considerable doubts about the wisdom of their research in the first place, my opinion of him grew markedly warmer. 'We have had some success with cogitator simulations, however, which lead us to believe it might be possible to interfere with the control

mechanism.'

'You could jam the influence of the hive mind?' I asked in astonishment, with a sudden flare of hope. If that were possible, it would hand humanity an enormous tactical advantage, turning the vast, unstoppable armies of the tyranids into mere swarms of mindless, instinct-driven beasts. Still hellishly dangerous, of course, but far easier to oppose and overcome than a cohesive whole driven by a malign intelligence.

'In theory,' Kildhar said, 'although finding an effective method of doing so would take a great deal more study.'

'Which we don't have time for,' I concluded.

'Regrettably, that is the case,' she agreed. 'Barring an unexpected breakthrough, I would estimate the necessary research to take a further two to three decades.' By which time Fecundia would either have been long since saved by conventional means, or reduced to a barren cinder lost in the wake of a reinvigorated hive fleet large enough to consume the entire Gulf region.

'Our best course of action would be to maintain the blockade,' Yail said firmly. 'If the Navy can inflict enough losses, the tyranids will be forced to withdraw in search of easier prey.' He plodded to a hololith tank in the corner, which I strongly suspected had been set up with the intention of briefing me, as the familiar image of Fecudia and the starships in orbit about it appeared as soon as he activated the device. 'Until they establish a beachhead on the surface, they'll be unable to replenish the biomass they're losing. It's simply a matter of holding on, until the tipping point is reached.'

'If we can,' I said, studying the tactical display carefully. 'They've a lot of ships in reserve, and every one of ours they cripple opens up a gap in our orbital defences. Once they've poked enough holes, they can start landing in force.'

'We saw off their first assault,' Kildhar said, as though she'd been manning an air defence turret personally. Yail and I exchanged a look.

'That wasn't an assault,' I explained, as carefully as I could. 'They were simply probing our defences. Getting some scout creatures down was just a bonus.'

'Lucky so many of 'em came down in the desert,' Jurgen said. 'If they'd hit the hives, there'd have been a real mess to clear up.'

'Some of them did,' Yail replied. If he was startled by my aide's sudden interjection, he hid it well. He manipulated the hololith again, and a rash of

contact icons appeared across the face of the planet. ‘Luckily, the Lord General had anticipated the contingency, and the Imperial Guard contained the incursion.’

‘He’s good at that,’ I said absently, studying the display with a growing sense of disquiet. As I’d have expected, the majority of tyranid icons were in or near the main population centres, homing in on the greatest concentrations of biomass, but there was a small cluster in the desert, right about where we were.

The palms of my hands prickled again. I couldn’t have said why, but something about that little group of contacts struck me as sinister. It wasn’t unusual for tyranids to go to ground in the wilderness areas of prey worlds, of course, biding their time until they’d built up their strength by hit-and-run raids – I’d observed the tactic at first-hand on far too many occasions – but off-hand I couldn’t recall a single instance in which they’d done so while simultaneously striking at far more tempting targets. The landing sites in the desert were definitely too close to one another to be purely random, which meant that the hive mind which sent them must have had an objective in mind.

And there was only one possible target out here which made any sense. ‘Regio Quinquaginta Unus,’ I said, only half aware that I’d spoken the thought aloud.

‘It’s over there,’ Kildhar said, with a faint air of puzzlement, gesturing in the direction of the huge slab of armourglass surrounding the bridge. ‘You should be able to see it by now.’ And indeed I could, the blocky six-sided structure rising out of the sand in the distance, almost as I remembered it on our first approach. Except that this time I was looking up at it, even from this tremendous height. It loomed over the harvester, a man-made mesa, so imposing in its solidity that, for a moment, I began to wonder if it could possibly really be under threat, despite my previous encounters with the ravening hordes of the hive mind, then reason reasserted itself. I’d seen far more formidable fortifications than this breached by the endless tide of malevolent chitin, and complacency in the face of the tyranids never ended well.

‘There’s something here the hive mind wants,’ I said, setting out my reasoning as swiftly and concisely as I could.

Yail nodded thoughtfully. ‘I concur,’ he said, after a swift glance at the hololith, digesting the tactical information at once. We both looked at



Kildhar, who stared back at us blankly.

‘I have no idea what,’ she said. ‘I study their physiology, not their mental processes.’

‘In pursuit of which, you’ve collected a small army of the things,’ I said, scarcely able to credit that someone so intelligent could be so dense.

‘But they’re inert,’ Kildhar protested.

‘For now,’ I said, remembering how readily the ghastly creatures had revived from their frozen tomb on *Nusquam Fundamentibus*.

‘Whatever their objective,’ Yail said, ‘taking live specimens inside the shrine would be extremely inadvisable. We would simply be doing the hive mind’s work for it.’

‘That goes without saying,’ I agreed, and Kildhar’s face hardened (apart from the metallic parts, which were hard enough to begin with).

‘The whole purpose of gathering them was to run tests, in the hope of finding a weakness we can exploit. Unless we take them to the analyticum, that would be impossible. I must insist they be delivered as intended.’

‘And I must insist we refrain from doing anything so completely frak-witted!’ I snapped, turning away. ‘You can run it by Dysen if you want, but I can tell you right now what he’ll say. And so will the Lord General.’ Actually, knowing Zyvan, what he’d say would almost certainly require a little discreet redacting before being laid before a wider audience, but there was no point in going into that now.

‘I will consult Apothecary Sholer at the earliest opportunity,’ Yail said, and there, to the satisfaction of no one, the matter rested until we reached the shrine.

‘Your analysis of the tactical situation seems perfectly sound,’ Sholer said. It had taken him some time to finish up whatever he was doing in the lower depths of the installation, and I’d taken the opportunity to have a hot bath and send what was left of my uniform to be laundered. Despite my preference for a complete change of clothes, there wouldn’t be time to arrange it, and I fully intended to depart aboard the first shuttle to make it down here in any case. Despite a lingering dampness about both my hair and greatcoat, neither of which had had time to dry fully, simply having both free of the majority of the sand they’d acquired over the last couple of days made me feel a good deal more comfortable and optimistic.

‘I’m glad you agree,’ I said, taking an appreciative sip at the mug of recaff

Jurgen had handed me before departing in search of some food to go with it. The steel-walled meeting room was a trifle chilly, and the lingering dampness hanging about me intensified it. We must have been close to the refrigerated vault where the creatures transplanted from Nusquam Fundumentibus remained entombed.

It was a small gathering, just the Apothecary, Yail, Kildhar and myself. Dysen had sent a vox message to convey that whatever we decided was fine by him, but carefully worded so that if it all went ploid-shaped no one could claim that he'd actively supported it, and Zyvan was too busy to be contacted at all, not entirely by coincidence I strongly suspected.

'The magos, however, also has a point,' Sholer went on, almost making me choke on the bitter liquid, 'and makes a persuasive case.' He paused, glancing across the room at Kildhar, who was seated rigidly on one of the metal chairs around the central table, trying to pretend she was interested in the data scrolling across the pict screen in front of her. She was the only one sitting; as I'd observed before, the Adeptus Astartes seldom did so, while I'd found the blasted chairs uncomfortable enough before, let alone now, while the memory of hours in the saddle was still so fresh in my mind, and elsewhere. She looked up, meeting Sholer's gaze, with an expression of pleased surprise. 'Although on balance, I'm bound to agree with Commissar Cain and the brother-sergeant. The risk of allowing infiltrating organisms within the sanctuary is too great to take.'

I disagree,' Kildhar said, keeping her voice tech-priest neutral with an obvious effort. If I was any judge, she'd rather shy the data-slate she'd been reading at his head. 'The specimens you revived remain secure. The same precautions should be sufficient to keep the fresh ones confined.'

I felt a fresh prickle of unease. 'Just how many 'nids did you thaw out?' I asked, doing a rather better job of hiding my feelings than Kildhar had managed. 'Just out of interest.'

'Eleven hormagaunts,' Sholer replied at once, in a manner I felt to be excessively casual, given how lethal the creatures were. 'They were clustered close together in the ice, so I inferred that they were part of the same brood.'

'A reasonable deduction,' Kildhar said, with clear approval, 'which should help us to compare like with like.'

'And where are they now?' Yail asked, with a glance at the door as though he expected a swarm of gaunts to start ripping their way through it at any

moment. When a Space Marine in power armour<sup>157</sup> starts looking uneasy it's never a good sign, and I had to suppress the impulse to reach for my weapons.

'The holding pens on the lowest level,' Sholer said. 'They are perfectly secure, I can assure you.'

'Like the genestealers were?' I asked, perhaps a little less than politely, but under the circumstances I was prepared to forego the niceties.

'The two aren't remotely comparable,' Kildhar said, a trifle testily for someone who was supposed to be beyond obvious displays of emotion. 'Genestealers are capable of abstract reasoning, particularly the hybrids. They could have planned their escape, overcome the security precautions by using their intelligence. Hormagaunts are just instinct-driven beasts.'

'Unless the hive mind is directing their actions,' Yail pointed out.

'That can't be the case, there were no synapse creatures accompanying them,' Kildhar said impatiently, as if that should have been obvious to everyone.

'Could they have been pre-programmed, though?' I asked. 'Like servitors?'

'An intriguing notion,' Sholer said, cutting across her indignant denial. 'There's no record of any previous instances of such a case, but that doesn't mean it's not possible.'

'You're all just jumping at shadows!' Kildhar declaimed, giving up any pretence of remaining calm. 'If we're ever going to stand a chance of overcoming the hive fleets, not just here but across the rest of the galaxy, we need to stay shortout dispassionate!' She took a deep breath. 'I apologise for the unnecessary vehemence of my remarks.'

'We've all been under a good deal of strain,' I said diplomatically, although privately I doubted that the Space Marines considered anything untoward about the situation. They spent their whole lives facing the enemies of the Emperor, and were hardly likely to get excited about the latest ones to be wandering across the sights of their bolters.

'Perhaps you would care to inspect the pens?' Sholer asked, addressing his remarks to me, although a brief inclination of his head included Yail in the invitation. 'Perhaps that would go some way towards alleviating your concern.'

'Perhaps it would,' I said, although I doubted it very much.

The pens were located a few levels beneath the meeting room, and, as I'd anticipated, the temperature of the air there was noticeably lower. I shivered, grateful for the recaff I still clutched, and the warm salt-grox bap Jurgen had managed to procure from somewhere on my behalf.

'You see?' Kildhar said, with the air of someone pointing out a self-evident truth. 'The specimens are totally secure.'

'They certainly seem to be,' I conceded. We were looking down into a sheer-sided square shaft lined with ceramite, too slick for the scuttling mass of gaunts to get a foot or claw-hold on, from behind the reassuring screen of a slab of armourglass thick enough to have shielded the driver's viewing slit of a Leman Russ. Below us and above them a steel mesh roofed the chamber, crackling every now and then as a portion of the charge it carried leaked across in the cool, damp air, in case they managed to find a way up regardless. 'Stealers would have been up and through it in no time, of course, but the gaunts were less well adapted to climbing.'

'I felt it prudent to restrict our researches to hormagaunts, for the time being,' Sholer said, 'given the relative ease of being able to confine them.'

'Prudent indeed,' I concurred tactfully, which I suppose it was if you were really bound and determined to go ahead with this courting of disaster. Termagants were able to shoot at you, genestealers had already proved more than adequate to the challenge of freeing themselves, and most of the other creatures on ice were either able to burrow their way to freedom, strong enough to break straight through the walls, or could channel the will of the hive mind, none of which were particularly tempting prospects right at the moment.

'Then I see no reason not to put the newly acquired ones in the adjacent chamber,' Kildhar said, returning to her theme with a vengeance. Yail and I turned to Sholer, hoping he'd be able to convince her to finally drop the matter, but to our mutual surprise he seemed to be wavering.

'The hormagaunts, perhaps,' he said thoughtfully, while Yail and I looked at one another in mingled consternation and disbelief.

'You said yourself the risk was unacceptable,' I expostulated, and the Apothecary nodded pensively in reply.

'I did,' he said slowly, 'but, on reflection, Magos Kildhar still presents a compelling argument. Time is unquestionably of the essence, and our work would proceed more quickly and effectively with the facilities of the analyticum to hand.'

‘What about the other specimens?’ Yail asked, an instant before I could. ‘Should they be purged?’

‘Absolutely not!’ Kildhar said. ‘We can leave them aboard the harvester for the time being, and study them there as best we can.’

‘Ready to be absorbed into the swarm the moment the second wave hits,’ I said, making no effort at all to hide how I felt about that.

‘We can take appropriate precautions,’ Kildhar said, ‘like we’ve done with the specimens in storage. I’ve already instructed the harvester captain to remove the dampers from the motivator power core. If it becomes necessary we’ll be able to detonate it, and sterilise the entire load.’

‘That might work,’ I conceded, reluctantly. No wonder the captain had looked so fed up.

‘It will,’ she assured me, probably mistaking agreement for acquiescence.

I turned to Sholer. ‘Does that mean you’ve got the freezer rigged too?’

‘In a manner of speaking,’ he told me. ‘Magos Dysen’s suggestion was essentially sound. The reactors have been reconfigured to vent raw plasma directly into the chamber, vaporising everything within it almost instantly. The only time-consuming part of the process was digging pressure vents to the surface, to give the expanding steam somewhere to go.’ He permitted himself a thin smile, not an expression I normally associated with a member of the Adeptus Astartes. ‘It would be somewhat ironic to destroy the shrine in order to save it.’

‘Quite so,’ I said, less reassured than I would have liked. ‘These vents. Not large enough for anything to crawl up, are they?’

‘Credit us with a little imagination, commissar,’ Kildhar said. ‘Of course they’re not.’ She hesitated. ‘Well, some of the smaller ones might fit, I suppose, but we’ve put grilles on the ends of the shafts. And it’s not as if anything’s going to be moving around down there anyway, they’re all frozen solid.’

‘That’s true,’ I said. ‘But I’m just as worried about things getting in from outside.’

‘If they do, they’ll be vaporised along with the others,’ Yail pointed out. ‘But I’ll make sure combat servitors are posted to cover the tops of the shafts anyway.’

‘Then I believe we’re in agreement,’ Sholer said, although he seemed to be the only one. ‘We’ll move the hormagaunts Magos Kildhar collected into the adjacent holding pen, and continue our researches for as long as we

can.’ He turned to Yail, who still seemed to me to be torn between loyalty to his Chapter and plain common sense. Unfortunately, as it always will for a Space Marine, loyalty won.

‘I will see to the security arrangements,’ he said, plainly not liking it.

‘Then we have little to worry about,’ Sholer said, inaccurately. He turned back to Kildhar. ‘I wish it understood that, although I may have been swayed by your arguments for the moment, I will sterilise every last specimen the instant I see even a hint of a danger to this shrine and the people within it.’

Kildhar nodded, tightly. ‘I would expect nothing less,’ she said.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## TWENTY-TWO

‘They’re completely out of their minds,’ I told Zyvan over the vox-link, heedless of whether the transmission was being monitored or not. ‘Now we’ve made sure of that, I need a shuttle here as quickly as possible.’ Before the inevitable happened, the shrine was overrun, and everyone got eaten, including me. No point in sounding as though I was making a panic-stricken run for it, though, even if I was, so I added ‘I’ve wasted enough time away from the real war as it is.’

‘Don’t worry, Ciaphas,’ Zyvan assured me, a trace of amusement in his voice, ‘you’ll be back here before the next wave hits. You’ve fought the ’nids more often than anyone else I can think of, and I’ll need your insights in the command centre when we take them on again.’ Which came as a relief. Despite my misgivings about being aboard a spacecraft with a tyranid fleet incoming, it would still be preferable to being stuck on the ground once the full force of the invasion was unleashed. If the worst came to the worst, and the fleet was forced to cut and run, I’d escape along with it instead of being marooned on a world doomed to be devoured. Unless the scuttling horrors I’d glimpsed on the tau explorators’ pict-cast got to me first...

Torn between two terrors, I vacillated indecisively for a moment, before reason reasserted itself. I was definitely in danger here, now, from Kildhar’s reckless insistence on bringing the creatures she’d rounded up inside, and it was pointless worrying about anything which only might happen in the future.

‘I’ll be waiting on the pad,’ I said, and Zyvan chuckled, clearly believing me eager to get back in the fray.

‘You’ll get pretty bored,’ he said. ‘The Navy won’t have a shuttle free for a while yet. Everything’s on rearming and resupply runs, before the ’nids hit us again. A personnel pick-up’s pretty low priority, even if it’s for you.’

Nads, I thought. It sounded as though I was going to be stuck here for several hours at least. No point in sounding petulant about it, though, Cain the Hero was supposed to put duty first at all times, so I just put my cheerfully resigned voice on instead. ‘Goes without saying,’ I said breezily. ‘Just try not to get stuck in without me this time.’

‘We’ll do our best,’ Zyvan assured me, ‘and we’ll let you know as soon as your ride’s on the way.’ Which was all I could reasonably hope for, I supposed.

‘Sorry to bother you, sir,’ Jurgen said, his characteristic odour wandering into the room which had been made available to me a second or two before his corporeal presence. Like most Adeptus Mechanicus guest quarters I’d been obliged to avail myself of over the years, it was clean, ergonomically laid out, and curiously dispiriting, the closest thing to a human touch being the devotional cogwheel icon in a niche in the corner. ‘Apothecary Sholer thought you might want to look in on the gaunts in the pen.’

‘I suppose we should,’ I said, somewhat heartened by the observation that he was still lugging the melta around, instead of leaving it in the adjoining room, which had been put at his disposal. Zyvan and the admiral<sup>158</sup> would want as full an account as I could give them of whatever the Mechanicus and the Reclaimers were getting up to, and observing the safety precautions they’d put in place to contain the newly-arrived specimens might put their minds at rest, although, in all honesty, I doubted that it would do the same for mine. This whole undertaking had *Catastrophe* written all over it, and the best I could hope for was to be long gone before everything fell apart.

I can’t deny that with my aide and his melta at my shoulder I felt a little happier than I otherwise would have done given our destination, even going so far as to nod an affable greeting to a few of the skitarii patrolling the corridors in tense-looking pairs. They’d clearly been briefed to be ready for trouble, which was something of a comfort, knowing I wouldn’t be left to face the worst alone if (or more likely when) it happened, although I still clung obstinately to the hope that I’d be gone before it did.

Kildhar and Sholer were waiting for us in the observation gallery, and I



glanced into the pen below us as I entered, expecting to see the same milling mass of hormagaunts I'd looked down on the last time I was here. Instead of pacing, or sitting randomly about the floor, though, all were clustered in one corner, their heads raised, as if testing the wind.

‘What’s the matter with them?’ I asked.

‘Just what we were discussing,’ Sholer said. ‘We have not observed this behaviour on any previous occasion.’

‘They’re sensing the presence of the new specimens,’ Kildhar said, the effort of modulating her voice all too plain; she was positively skipping with excitement<sup>159</sup> at the prospect of putting her theories to the test.

‘And speaking of which,’ I said, ‘they would be where?’ The adjacent pen was empty, so far as I could see, unless they had a particularly well-camouflaged lictor stashed in it.

‘On their way,’ Kildhar assured me, and moved over to a control lectern set in the wall beneath the slab of armourglass. She poked a couple of switches, and a panel in the wall of the empty pen slid aside, to reveal a dark tunnel beyond. A moment later a torrent of hormagaunts bounded into the chamber, and the hatch slid quietly closed behind them. ‘They’ll be disorientated for a few minutes,’ the magos biologis went on, ‘exploring the boundaries, and searching for a way out.’

‘They don’t look disorientated to me,’ I said, as the whole pack of them swarmed across the pen, throwing themselves against the wall separating them from the gaunts in the adjacent one. Those too had perked up the minute the newcomers had arrived, and begun attacking the barrier with their scything claws, seemingly undeterred by their complete lack of success in getting through.

‘Fascinating,’ Kildhar said. ‘They’re trying to join up, creating a larger group.’

‘Which would be a really bad idea,’ I reminded everyone, just in case they’d forgotten that somewhat basic fact.

‘Indeed it would,’ Sholer agreed, his attention almost entirely on some incomprehensible stream of icons and text, rushing across the pict screen in front of him too fast to be read. He glanced briefly at Kildhar, who seemed even more engrossed if that were possible, her eyes fixed unblinkingly on the blizzarding data in front of her. ‘I’m picking up enhanced activity in the basal ganglia of all the monitored subjects.’

‘As am I,’ the magos responded, ‘although since there was only time to

attach external instrumentation, results from the fresh specimens will be less comprehensive and possibly less reliable.'

'Would one of you mind explaining what's going on here?' I asked, adding 'in layman's terms,' a trifle hastily as Kildhar opened her mouth to respond.

'We are attempting to monitor the brain activity of the creatures, which has changed significantly since the two groups became aware of their proximity to one another,' she told me. 'A task of considerable complexity,' she added after a moment's pause, meaning *so shut up and let us get on with it*.

I looked down, catching a glimpse of small metal boxes about the size of data-slates riveted to the carapaces of several of the new batch. The ones from the freezer weren't so adorned, although I thought I could detect some damage to the chitin of their heads, as if minor puncture wounds had been recently inflicted, and only partially healed.<sup>160</sup> 'They seem pretty agitated,' I said. Both groups were still attacking the wall between them with single-minded diligence, fortunately failing to make much of an impression on the thick slab of ceramite.

'As I predicted,' Kildhar said, 'they feel compelled to join together. If they do, their brain activity should synchronise.'

'Just as well they're not going to,' I said, just as she flicked another switch. The wall between the two cages began to sink into the floor, and both sets of gaunts grew even more frantic, if that were possible, leaping and scrambling over one another in their efforts to be the first over the top. 'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

'Gathering data!' Kildhar snapped. 'We could be on the verge of saving the galaxy!'

'And you could be on the verge of killing us all!' I riposted, lunging towards the controls, but Sholer was faster, stabbing the switch with his ceramite-encased finger. In his haste he overdid it a little, denting the lectern, and eliciting a shower of sparks from the abused array of controls. The descending wall ground to a halt, rose a few centimetres, and stuck, still low enough for both sets of creatures to surmount easily.

'This was not agreed to!' he rumbled, his voice deepening even more than usual.

'It's the obvious next step!' Kildhar riposted. 'We need reliable data on the blending of consciousness within the swarm!'

The two of them glared at one another, while I hovered indecisively, wondering how best to intervene without becoming the lightning rod for the

heightened emotions of both. Kildhar would be relatively harmless, despite the augmetics she was no doubt stuffed with, but an angry Space Marine would be a force to be reckoned with, preferably from a considerable distance. On the other hand, this was all being recorded for later analysis, and it wouldn't look good for me to be caught flat-footed, instead of doing something decisive to bring them back to their senses.

'Are they supposed to be killing each other?' Jurgen asked, snatching everyone's attention.

Relieved at the fortuitous interruption, I turned to look. My aide was right – the creatures in the newly-combined pen were tearing into one another with all the ferocity at their command, and, as they were hormagaunts in a feeding frenzy, that was a lot. Ichor and viscera sprayed everywhere, as the scuttling nightmares snapped and slashed at one another in what looked to me like an indiscriminate orgy of bloodletting.

'They should not,' Sholer said, looking down thoughtfully at the carnage below, his anger replaced by curiosity as quickly as flicking a switch.

'I don't understand it,' Kildhar said, a note of bewilderment entering her voice. 'All the data we've gathered suggested their minds should have meshed as soon as they came together.'

'Perhaps they require the mediation of a synapse organism to facilitate the melding,' Sholer suggested.

'Maybe they just don't like each other,' Jurgen said, cutting to the essentials as always.

'Maybe they don't,' Sholer agreed, to my considerable surprise. 'We've always thought of the tyranids as a single, unified threat, but there are some magos biologis who theorise that the different hive fleets compete for prey.<sup>161</sup> A contention I find myself far less sceptical of now than hitherto.'

'Because these are definitely from different fleets,' I said, the coin dropping. Looking down at the ichor-flecked melee, I found myself able to distinguish the combatants easily enough by sight: the gaunts from the freezer had the same speckled patterning on their thoraxes I recalled so well from *Nusquam Fundamentibus*, while the new arrivals had darker banding on their carapaces, and the edges of their scything claws. Something about that combination of markings seemed vaguely familiar too, come to think of it, although I couldn't put my finger on where I'd seen it before. By that time I'd encountered tyranids on a dozen occasions at least, and the bewildering variety of colour and shading I'd seen exhibited by the

creatures had become thoroughly mixed up in my mind.'

'Quite so,' Sholer said.

'We have to stop them!' Kildhar expostulated, staring downwards at the charnel pit beneath our feet. 'Before we lose the lot!'

'Good luck with that,' I said, having no inclination to try separating the combatants. In fact, the more of each other they killed, the better I liked it. The newcomers were definitely getting the best of it, although that was hardly surprising, given that they outnumbered the others by almost two to one. As I watched in horrified fascination, the last of the thawed-out gaunts fell, its head wrenched from its body, while a second assailant slashed its torso open from gushing neck to the root of its tail. 'Perhaps they'll calm down a bit now while they feed.'

'They don't look very hungry,' Jurgen said with a faint note of surprise, which I could hardly blame him for. In our experience hormagaunts were little more than voracious appetites on legs, and I expected them to begin gorging themselves on the cadavers of the fallen at once. The half-dozen or so survivors of the short and vicious melee in the holding pens seemed to have other ideas, however, ignoring the bounty of carrion their efforts had won in favour of flinging themselves against the wall opposite the partially-retracted barrier which had separated them from their recently-thawed adversaries.

'They don't,' I agreed, as they began attacking the wall, as single-mindedly and fruitlessly as before, so far as I could tell. 'Now what are they up to?' Something about the location they'd chosen made me uneasy, although I couldn't have said why. So far as I could see it was a blank panel, no different from those on any of the other walls, but something had attracted them straight to it.

'They're trying to get the access tunnel open,' Kildhar said, sounding completely bewildered. 'But they should be acting purely on instinct, not showing signs of reasoning ability!'

'Perhaps they don't know that,' I said, dryly. Then a more alarming thought struck me. 'The panel will hold, won't it?'

'Of course,' she assured me, with complete confidence. 'The locks can only be opened from up here.' She gestured towards the lectern, bearing the scar of Sholer's gauntlet, from which a thin wisp of smoke was still rising. Her expression wavered. 'Oh.'

'Brother-Sergeant Yail, meet me in the cryogenitorium,' Sholer rapped out,

assessing the situation at once, and already on his way to the door. I glanced downwards, my worst fears realised: even as we spoke the gaunts had managed to get the sliding panel partially open, and a ridged and sinuous tail disappeared through the gap as I watched. 'Commissar, will you join us?'

'Right behind you,' I said, unable to think of an excuse to refuse on the spur of the moment that wouldn't have sounded feeble, even to me. I hurried out after him, Jurgen a reassuring presence at my heels, leaving Kildhar staring dumbly down at the mess below, clearly still wondering what could possibly have gone wrong.

The cavern beneath the shrine was just as cold as I remembered it, and the surfaces underfoot just as treacherous. Fortunately, the route Sholer took to get us there terminated on the surface of the ice, instead of forcing us to take our lives in our hands at the top of the narrow and slippery bridge, bringing us out through the structure from which he'd emerged the first time we'd spoken on this world.

'Over there,' Jurgen said, pulling ahead of us on the frozen surface, as sure-footed as only a Valhallan could be in sub-zero temperatures. The gaggle of gaunts were clustered together a hundred metres or so away, flailing at the ice with their scything claws. 'Looks like they're digging.'

'Trying to revive something,' I said, remembering the gaunts we'd seen on Nusquam Fundamentibus doing precisely the same thing. On that occasion they'd released a particularly large and unpleasant bioform, which had tried to make a meal of me, the squad I was with and our transport vehicle, and would almost certainly have done so but for the intervention of a passing Valkyrie pilot with a warhead or two to spare. The thought was not a pleasant one.

'Or kill it,' Sholer said, putting on a burst of speed to keep up with Jurgen, something his power armour made look ridiculously easy. I floundered in their wake, not entirely unhappy to have a Space Marine standing between me and the murderous beasts, but reluctant to fall too far behind in case we were flanked. If I got cut off from the others I'd become easy meat, torn apart before my companions had a chance to intervene.

Not that the hideous creatures looked about to charge, still utterly intent on using their grotesquely elongated forelimbs as pickaxes, but it never paid to be complacent about 'nids, as I'd already had occasion to reflect. I drew my

weapons, both fully recharged and ready for use, feeling a good deal more comfortable as soon as I felt their familiar weight in my hands. Jurgen had the melta on aim, and let fly at the nearest. The shot went wide, which was hardly surprising given that he was firing on the run, but it caught one of the others a glancing blow, raising a cloud of steam as the ice around it flashed into vapour. The mist hung for a moment, blanketing everything, reducing the brood to an inchoate mass of barely-seen movement.

‘Here they come!’ Sholer warned, drawing his bolt pistol in a single smooth motion, and planting a couple of explosive-tipped rounds in the middle of the thorax of the first gaunt to burst from the shrouding fog. Jurgen dropped to one knee, steadying his bulky weapon, and took down another, renewing the fog in a fresh burst of steam as he did so.

‘Use the lasgun!’ I told him, cracking off a couple of shots of my own at the nearest dimly-seen shadow, which had no effect at all that I could see. ‘The melta’s giving them too much cover!’ Not to mention the risk of a near miss thawing out even more of the hideous creatures. Having caught up with my companions, I stood back to back with Sholer’s reassuringly impregnable-seeming bulk, swinging the chainsword in a defensive pattern designed to protect me from anything rushing suddenly out of the murk.

‘Right you are, sir,’ Jurgen agreed, imperturbable as ever, dropping the melta as he spoke. The emitter hissed as it touched the ice, creating another, small patch of mist, which began to disperse quickly. I just had to hope the cover he’d inadvertently created for our assailants would do the same before they could take full advantage of it. A moment later the crackle of his Guard-issue small-arm, firing short, precise bursts, echoed across the artificial ice field.

As the mist lifted, we began to see our targets more clearly. Unfortunately, that meant they could see us equally well, which was far less encouraging. The whole pack of them began to bound forwards, thick drool slithering from their gaping jaws, flecks of it freezing around their muzzles alongside the blood and viscera deposited there during their brief scrimmage in the holding pens.

I braced myself to meet the charge, hoping my duellist’s reflexes would be enough to prevent my head from being lopped off by a swipe from the first gaunt to get within reach, but the bone-chilling cold was getting to me in earnest now, stabbing through my torn and tattered greatcoat and slowing my movements as it leached the warmth from my blood. I cracked off a

couple of shots from my laspistol, more in the hope of making them flinch than of actually dropping one, although in my experience once a gaunt got the scent of prey in its nostrils it would take a lot more than a las-bolt flicking past its ear to distract it. Jurgen managed to down one of the scuttling horrors with a sustained burst from his lasgun, which must have drained the powerpack faster than he liked, as he let it fall to the ice and snapped in a fresh one in a single fluid movement, never taking his eyes from the rich selection of targets bearing down on us as he did so. Sholer's bolt pistol barked again, and an elongated head exploded, the body it was attached to continuing to bound forwards a couple of paces before crashing to the ice in a spray of dislodged crystals and rapidly-congealing ichor.

'There are too many of them!' I gasped out, raising my chainsword to parry a slash from the leading gaunt. They'd split up as they charged, sweeping round to flank us, just as I'd feared a few moments before, but now all three of us were encircled, not just me. Somehow, being about to die in the company of friends didn't seem much of an improvement, although I supposed it would afford me the chance for a few last words. Not that anyone would survive to remember them, and the best I seemed able to come up with at the moment was a heartfelt 'Frak off!' at the one trying to close its jaws in my throat as I ran it through with the whirling blade, ripping the weapon free in a spray of viscera as I spun to meet the next attack. Just as I feared, my reflexes seemed painfully slow, and I'd have been an instant too late, losing my head for my pains, if I hadn't slipped on the frozen surface and stumbled at the last possible minute. The scything claw I'd meant to parry passed over my head instead, and I made to rise, striking up into the gaunt's momentarily-exposed underbelly.

'Stay down!' a new voice called, boosted by a helmet-mounted amplivox, and I did as it suggested, getting a mouthful of ice crystals as I tried to present as low a profile as possible. The distinctive *hisss-crack* of bolters being discharged, overlapping in short bursts, assaulted my eardrums, and I rolled clear as the shredded remains of the gaunt I'd been about to strike at dropped to the ice right on the spot I'd been a second before.

I rolled to my feet, to find Yail and a couple of his brother Adeptus Astartes double-timing it towards us, the muzzles of their bolters still smoking from the barrage which had taken down the whole pack, missing my companions and I by what would have seemed a miracle to anyone less familiar than I with the phenomenal standard of their marksmanship. Jurgen

was getting back up too, brushing the ice crystals from his uniform, and bending to retrieve his precious melta, which I could hardly fault him for, as it was far more effective against the 'nids than his lasgun. (Anywhere it wasn't going to help them hide from us, anyway.)

'Sergeant Yail,' I said. 'Pleased to see you.' Which barely began to cover it, of course, but I had a reputation for sangfroid to maintain, and now the danger was past there seemed little point in being overly effusive.

'As am I,' Sholer said. 'I expected your response to be a little less tardy.'

'My apology for any inconvenience, Apothecary,' Yail said, his tone devoid of any trace of sarcasm which I could detect. 'It took us a moment to get through the security systems.'

'I thought you were supposed to have complete access?' I said, surprised, and Yail nodded.

'We are. However, Magos Kildhar ordered a complete lockdown of the lower levels, and that impeded our progress.'

'Well, I can't fault her caution,' I said, 'although her timing leaves a lot to be desired.' Something started nagging at me as I spoke. Given her recklessness in bringing the gaunts into the shrine in the first place, not to mention the genestealers she'd been breeding, this sudden rush of common sense to the head seemed uncharacteristic to say the least. But perhaps the shock of what had happened had made her sit up and smell the recaff (a mug of which I could really have done with about then).

'Any idea what the gaunts were trying to dig up?' Jurgen asked, passing me a flask from which steam rose invitingly into the frigid air. If I hadn't been aware of his remarkable psi-damping abilities, I'd sometimes swear the man was a mind-reader.

'Not yet,' I said, edging cautiously towards the cracked and pitted ice they'd been attacking so single-mindedly. They hadn't had time to get very deep, thank the Throne, barely scratching the surface in fact, but it was pretty clear what they'd been after. I tilted my neck to get a clearer look. 'Throne on Earth, it's the bio-ship fragment!'





## TWENTY-THREE

‘What did they want with that?’ Jurgen asked, furrowing his brow in puzzlement.

‘To kill it, I would imagine,’ I said. ‘You saw what they did to the gaunts from the other swarm.’

‘But how did they know it was there?’ my aide persisted.

‘A good question,’ Sholer said. Jurgen looked faintly surprised, then pleased with himself, praise from a Space Marine being rare enough at the best of times, let alone aimed in his direction. ‘But it seems the hive fleet must be aware of its existence somehow, even though dormant.’<sup>162</sup>

‘Then the gaunts were still operating on instinct when they swarmed in here after all,’ I said, happy to at least be able to discount the presence of a lurking synapse creature somewhere on the premises.

Sholer nodded. ‘It appears so,’ he said, turning to lead the way back to the exit. ‘But the implications are disturbing.’

‘Most definitely,’ I agreed, my mind rather more focused on regaining the warmth of the upper levels than the implications of what we’d discovered. Time enough to discuss those once we’d thawed out, if you asked me. I reached for the handle of the thick metal door, and tugged at it. It refused to budge.

‘Allow me,’ Sholer said, with a hint of amusement. He reached out a hand, and slapped the plate of the genocode reader. Instead of registering his presence, however, the machine-spirit remained obdurate, and the door securely locked. ‘Override,’ he said, ‘in the name of Sholer, Apothecary to

the Reclaimers.'

'Lockdown in progress,' the machine-spirit responded, in a vox-coder drone uncannily like Dysen's.<sup>163</sup> 'Voiceprint recognition suspended. Genocode recognition suspended.'

'How did you get through?' I asked Yail, and he shrugged, quite a sight for a Space Marine in full armour.

'Forced it,' he said, to my complete lack of surprise. 'But it was easier from the other side.'

'It would be,' I agreed. Pushing, he and his comrades would have been able to put their whole weight behind it, whereas on this side the handle provided the only point of purchase. Only one of the Adeptus Astartes would be able to pull at a time, and with his superhuman musculature, supplemented by the power of his armour, the chances were he'd only succeed in yanking the thing clean off.

'I can get it open,' Jurgen offered, steadying his melta, and Sholer nodded his approval.

'Quicker than taking the bolters to it,' he agreed.

'Won't that give the specimens the run of the shrine if any revive?' I asked.

Sholer inclined his head again. 'In theory,' he agreed. 'But they can't thaw out while the refrigeration plant remains operative. And doors can always be replaced.'

'True,' I said, my desire to be out of the bone-numbing cold as quickly as possible overwhelming any other objections I might have had. 'Whenever you're ready, Jurgen.' I closed my eyes against the anticipated flash, which punched through my eyelids as brightly as it always did when he fired his favourite weapon this close to where I was standing, and felt the backwash of heat flow over me, restoring a semblance of feeling to my numb extremities at last.

'That's got it,' he said, which was hardly surprising given that he'd hit it from point-blank range, and I blinked my vision clear of the dancing after-images. The thick metal slab was half-melted, slumping against its hinges, and without another word<sup>164</sup> the two Reclaimers accompanying Yail stepped forwards. Ceramite gauntlets reached out to grasp it, their fingers sinking into the softened metal, and with a groan, like something alive and suffering, the door gave way at last.

'Where to?' I asked, jogging gratefully through the gap into the relative

warmth of the corridor beyond, doing my best to keep up with the superhumanly long strides of the Space Marines.

‘To the power plant control chapel,’ Sholer said, scattering red-robed tech-priests ahead of him like autumn leaves in a squall as he made his way through the maze of passageways on the lower levels. ‘Sub-level three.’ Which confirmed my tunnel rat’s instinct that we were still a fair distance below the surface. As I trotted along in the wake of the Adeptus Astartes I filled Zyvan in on what was going on, somewhat breathlessly I must admit, as I had less wind than usual left for talking.

‘You were right, they are insane,’ the Lord General commented. ‘The sooner you’re back up here the better.’

‘My sentiments exactly,’ I agreed, trying not to pant too audibly. By this time we were approaching the control chapel, and I picked up my pace a little more, reluctant to fall too far behind the reassuring bulk of the Space Marines. The heads of the acolytes manning the genetorium snapped round in our direction as we burst through the door in a flurry of weapons and armour, visibly shocked by our sudden unmannerly intrusion into so sacred a space. Like many of their shrines, it was long on polished steel and blinking lights, with innumerable dials and switches set into lecterns and wall displays. Pict screens were flashing up icons and images which meant nothing to me, which was probably just as well for my peace of mind.

‘Thank the circuits you’re here,’ Kildhar said, looking up as we shuffled around, trying to find somewhere to stand. The chapel was large enough, as such places go, but a quartet of Space Marines take up a lot of room, particularly when they’re waving bolters around, and Jurgen’s melta wasn’t exactly compact either. ‘This corruptfile imbecile won’t vent the reactors into the cryogenitorium.’

‘Good for him,’ I said curtly. ‘Considering we were locked in there.’

‘Were you?’ Kildhar looked confused for a moment, and then returned to her argument with the senior tech-priest present, which our arrival seemed to have interrupted. ‘Well, you’re not now, so let’s get the static things vaporised before they eat us all.’

‘That’s a bit of a turnaround,’ I muttered to Jurgen. The palms of my hands were itching again, a sign I’d learned to trust. Something really wasn’t right about this. ‘She’s the one who was hell-bent on preserving them.’ Sholer was looking puzzled too, in so far as I could read his expression at all.

‘With respect to your exalted position, magos,’ the tech-priest buzzed, the

insect-like harmonics added to his voice by a loose wire somewhere in his vox-coder growing increasingly irritating with every syllable, 'our understanding is that the reactor is to be vented only if the specimens currently in cryogenic storage present a clear and present danger to the shrine.' Had he a jaw still capable of movement, doubtless he would have set it at this point. When a mid-ranking functionary begins any sentence with 'with respect', you know he'd rather take a swim in an open sewer than budge a millimetre from his stated position.

'It's my opinion that they do,' Kildhar said. 'And if you haven't the throughput to get the job done, I have.' Shouldering past the incredulous tech-priest, she stabbed at a bank of switches with the tips of her fingers. At once, a row of lights turned red, and a warning klaxon began to sound somewhere in the depths of the building.

'This course of action is premature,' Sholer said, as a clockface appeared on one of the pict screens, counting down seconds with what seemed to me to be unnecessary eagerness. He turned to the tech-priest. 'Abort the venting.' With a relieved nod, the red-robed minion took a step towards the lectern.

'Stop right there,' Kildhar said, cold and determined. 'I'll decommission anyone who goes near the vent controls.' She drew a bolt pistol from the depths of her robe, a master crafted one if the finely wrought chasing of the devotional iconography was anything to go by, and the tech-priest stopped moving as abruptly as if she'd already pulled the trigger. At this range she stood a fair chance of penetrating the Space Marines' armour, let alone my tender hide, and I hoped she knew enough about the weapon to avoid discharging it by accident.

Of course, you don't point a gun at a group of Adeptus Astartes and expect them to just stand there making idle conversation. In a heartbeat, three bolters and a bolt pistol were pointing right back at her, while the genetorium acolytes scurried for whatever cover they could find. Jurgen began to raise the melta too, but I forestalled him with a gesture. If anyone so much as hiccuped, Kildhar would be reduced to shredded scrap and offal in a heartbeat, and I didn't see any point in barbecuing the remains into the bargain. Besides, there was a lot of delicate equipment scattered around the place, all of which probably needed to be kept in one piece if the almost inconceivable energies of the fusion reactor were to remain confined. I hadn't the slightest objection to the 'nids being vaporised, but

the notion of sharing their fate was considerably less attractive.'

'Magos,' I said, trying to keep my voice pitched to a conversational level, 'this hardly seems necessary.'

She turned a glance of withering scorn in my direction. 'Haven't you worked it out yet?' she demanded. 'It all fits!'

'Of course,' I said, the pieces clicking into place at last, leaving me wondering how I could have been so blind. 'You were on the *Spawn of Damnation* too. No wonder you seemed so keen to preserve the implanted serfs, and bring them back here.'

'I'm not sure I follow, sir,' Jurgen said, his brow furrowing and dislodging a few flakes of skin in the process.

'The serfs weren't the only ones brought into the brood mind,' I said. 'They let themselves be brought to Fecundia, knowing the most senior of the people ostensibly studying them was a part of it as well. And the so-called research was just an excuse to allow them to build up their numbers.'

'Exactly,' Kildhar said, the muzzle of her bolt pistol rock steady. 'Far more quickly than they could ever have done while trying to remain concealed among the general populace.'

'That's how they got out, too, isn't it?' I asked, almost blinded by the obvious. 'The genecode readers around the secure area were set up to recognise the print of someone whose genes had already been subverted. Every genestealer and hybrid in the shrine could simply walk through the door whenever they liked.'

'Then why didn't they?' Yail asked, looking ready to pull the trigger at any second. Not something I wanted him to do until I was sure I had all the answers; our alliance against the tyranids was shaky enough as it was, and if it turned out I was wrong, then its collapse could doom us all.

'Because they were waiting for the hive fleet to arrive,' I said. Now I was thinking about it in a wider context, it was no wonder the carapace markings of the gaunts Kildhar had brought in seemed familiar – they were the same as the ones on the genestealers that had done so much damage on the upper levels, and that I'd fled in terror from in the darkened labyrinth of the *Spawn of Damnation*.

'That's right,' Kildhar said, chipping in at just the right moment. 'They must have hoped to make it to the hives, and disrupt the defence effort.'

'Didn't they tell you?' Sholer asked, sarcastically.

'I'm not the corruptfile traitor!' Kildhar shouted, all attempts at tech-

priestly detachment long past. 'Why would I have upgraded the fleet auspexes if I wanted the tyranids to invade?'

'Because that's what implanted genestealer victims do,' I said wearily. 'I've seen it before. They fight alongside you as hard as anyone, until the brood mind exerts its influence. Most of the time they don't even know what they are. But the brood mind's still in there, nudging them now and again.' I turned to Sholer for confirmation. 'Who was it who kept arguing in favour of bringing the gaunts inside?'

'Magos Kildhar,' he said, in tones of deadening finality.

'Precisely.' I turned back to the distraught tech-priest. 'You have to admit, you did precisely what the hive mind wanted you to do. Bring its meat puppets into the shrine, so it could try to neutralise the one thing on the planet it's afraid of.'

'But I'm me!' The hand holding the bolt pistol was trembling now, Sholer square in its sights. 'He's the one who damaged the locking mechanism and let them into the cryogenitorium!'

'An accident,' Sholer said dismissively.

'Of course you'd say that!' Kildhar laughed, a short, ragged bark, with an edge of hysteria. 'You're the one who approved my request to study the implanted serfs in the first place. Covering your tracks!'

'A ridiculous assertion,' Sholer said. 'I was accompanied by my battle-brothers on every occasion I boarded the hulk. Or are you asserting that entire squads of us have been implanted?' I glanced sidelong at Yail, trying to judge how he was taking all this, but I didn't know him well enough to pick up any subtle cues he might be trying to suppress.

'You've certainly given us a lot to think about,' I said levelly, maintaining eye contact with Kildhar as I spoke. Truth to tell, I didn't know what to believe by now, other than that the vital thing was to keep all her attention on me. Jurgen and I were half-concealed by the towering bulk of the Adeptus Astartes in their power armour, and I took advantage of that to signal to him with my hand. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him nod, almost imperceptibly, and begin to move away, after propping his melta against a convenient lectern. 'But then, you're the one hell-bent on killing the bio-ship fragment. If anyone's doing what the hive fleet wants, right now, it's you.'

'Precisely,' Sholer said. 'We have to continue our researches to the last possible moment.'

‘The risk is too great,’ Kildhar insisted, with a quick glance to the rapidly diminishing numerals. ‘And if you’ve been implanted, that’s the hive mind talking.’ On the verge of making a dive for the control panel, Jurgen hesitated, and drew back. For a second, I must admit, it crossed my mind to simply shoot her, but if a stray round destroyed the lectern, there was no telling what might happen. For all I knew the reactor might run completely out of control, levelling the entire shrine, instead of simply belching the tyranids to vapour.<sup>165</sup> If my aide was going to seize his chance, I had to get her full attention, and keep it for a few vital seconds.

‘I could say the same,’ the Apothecary rejoined, accurately, but unhelpfully given our current circumstances.

‘When did you last have an augmetic upgrade?’ I asked, and a flicker of confusion appeared in the tech-priest’s eyes. Clearly, whatever she’d been expecting me to ask, this wasn’t it.

‘I don’t know. A while back. What does it matter?’

‘A magos of your seniority usually has far more visible enhancements,’ I said. If I’m honest, I was more or less guessing, although that certainly seemed true of the cogboys I’d encountered before.

‘I’ve been busy,’ she snapped.

‘For how long?’ I asked. ‘Since your time on the *Spawn*?’

‘I don’t know.’ Confusion was being replaced by doubt, now. ‘Upgrades... system log...’ Her eyes unfocused for a moment. As they did so, Jurgen grabbed his chance, leaping for the control lectern behind her, and pushing as many switches as he could reach back the way they’d been before. The lights went back to green, the clock on the pict screen vanished, and the siren stopped howling in the bowels of the building.

‘Stop it!’ Kildhar turned on him in a fury, bringing up the bolt pistol to fire. Before she could, I took her square in the middle of the chest with a laspistol round. Reckless, you may say, with the panel still behind her, but with Jurgen’s life in the balance I simply took the shot, and worried about the possible consequences later. She staggered, and stared at me in outraged astonishment, charred wiring sparking and popping inside her ribcage. ‘You couldn’t... you shouldn’t... last upgrade...’ The bolt pistol fell from her nerveless fingers. Jurgen swooped, like a raptor on a vole, scooping the weapon up, and stuffing it into one of his collection of pouches for safe keeping.<sup>166</sup> Then Kildhar’s eyes cleared for a moment. ‘You were right. Sixty-three years ago.’

‘Because the screening prior to the augmentation process would have revealed the genetic contamination,’ Sholer said, handing his own bolt pistol to Yail. Faint scuffling sounds behind the lecterns indicated that the tech-priests were getting their courage back, or were more worried about the consequences of leaving the machine-spirits to fend for themselves for much longer than they were of emerging from cover, and a few nervous heads began to appear above and around the serried ranks of instrumentation. ‘I should be confined until it’s determined whether I too have been polluted.’

‘If you think it’s necessary,’ I said, ‘but I don’t think there’s much chance of that.’ Space Marines had their health checked down to the molecular level on a regular basis. ‘And the magos?’

I turned back to Kildhar, bringing my laspistol into line for a clean headshot. I’d granted the Emperor’s Peace<sup>167</sup> more times than I cared to recall, but still I hesitated. The tech-priest met my eyes.

‘Wait,’ she husked. ‘Valuable specimen. Study me...’ Then her eyes rolled up in their sockets, blood loss and trauma from the chest wound taking the matter out of my hands. Perhaps fortunately; to this day, I couldn’t tell you what decision I would have made.

‘Preserve the body for dissection,’ Sholer said, as he left the room, accompanied by one of the helmeted Reclaimers.

‘I’ll take care of it,’ I assured him, relieved to note that Jurgen had retrieved his melta, and was covering my back once again. Right now, he was the only other person on the planet I felt I could trust.





## TWENTY-FOUR

By the time I'd finished bringing Zyvan up to date, the sun was beginning to wester, painting the metallic walls of the conference room a shade uncomfortably reminiscent of blood. The revelation that Kildhar's pet genestealers had effectively been given the run of the place for the past sixty years had had a predictably seismic effect on everyone, from the Lord General on down. There was no telling how often one of the beasts had sneaked out of the holding pens to pass on the taint to an unwary cogboy, and everyone going about their business in the corridors seemed to be eyeing one another with thinly-veiled suspicion. Fortunately Regio Quinquaginta Unus was about as isolated as anywhere could be on this benighted ball of slag, but an awful lot of people had passed through it in the last six decades, and tracking them all down was proving to be an interesting challenge for the local Arbitrator's office.<sup>168</sup>

'They've started mass genetic screening in the main population centres,' a hololithic facsimile of the Lord General told me, flickering a little, apparently seated in the middle of the table which occupied the centre of the room. Fortunately, he was only about a third of his actual size, so he fitted quite comfortably. 'Starting with the most strategically vital institutions.'

'Have they found any hybrids or implants yet?' I asked, and Zyvan shrugged his insubstantial shoulders.

'Not yet. Twelve thousand down, twenty billion to go.'

'Not good odds,' I said, but that was the whole point of the tyranids sending their genestealers out ahead of the hive fleet. Quite apart from the

damage their puppets could do directly, if they became numerous enough to thoroughly infiltrate a planet's population, the diversion of resources required to track them down would put a serious dent in the overall defence effort.

‘What about the shrine?’ Zyvan asked.

‘Some good news there,’ I told him, knowing he could use some. ‘We’ve already screened half the cogboys, and they’ve all been clear so far. One or two of the others are still unaccounted for, so the skitarii are running a level by level search in case they’ve gone to ground somewhere.’

‘Our most probable hypothesis, however, is that they were assisting the mass breakout,’ Sholer put in, ‘and were all killed along with the ones on the shuttle.’ He’d been the first to be screened, of course, and, as I’d expected, turned out to be free of taint. For all I knew, his modified genes would simply have eaten any ‘stealer attempt to subvert them in any case.<sup>169</sup>

‘That’s something, anyway,’ Zyvan said, not bothering to ask if we’d had the skitarii scanned. They’d been the first through the gene lab, after Sholer and his brother Adeptus Astartes, that went without saying. He coughed, a little delicately. ‘And Magos Kildhar?’

‘Was definitely tainted,’ I said. ‘I don’t suppose we’ll ever know how or when she was implanted herself, but it was probably some time before the serfs were.’

‘Brother-Sergeant Yail is reviewing the mission logs for that period,’ Sholer added, ‘but our chances of success are not high.’

‘Then let’s concentrate on the present,’ Zyvan said, bringing us back to the business at hand. ‘Have you secured the bio-ship fragment?’

‘It’s still in the cryogenitorium,’ I told him. ‘Something that size, there’s not a lot else you can do with it.’

‘I’ve given instructions for it to be dug out and revived,’ Sholer put in, earning a scowl from Zyvan, before adding ‘subject to the agreement of Magos Dysen and yourselves, of course.’

‘I have to say I’m not sure about that,’ Zyvan said, and I nodded my agreement.

‘Neither am I,’ I admitted. Sholer and I had already discussed the matter, and, not for the first time, expediency was pushing me in a direction I’d rather not go. ‘But we have to face facts. The hive fleet was desperate to destroy the node, and that’s the first time we’ve seen one running scared of anything. We need to know why.’

‘I agree,’ El’hassai said, appearing next to the Lord General by increments, as he edged his way into range of the hololith projector. Sholer and I exchanged concerned glances, wondering how long he’d been lurking there, and how much of the preceding conversation he’d overheard. All of it probably, as Zyvan didn’t look at all surprised to see him. Come to that, there didn’t seem much point in trying to exclude the tau from our deliberations anyway, as we were supposed to be allies, and any tactical advantage we were able to come up with here would probably work just as well for them in the defence of Dr’t’h’nyr (although, since the warp shadow around the tyranid fleet was blocking our astropaths from passing on the information to the one accompanying Donali, whether they found out about it in time would depend entirely on how fast El’hassai’s own channels of communication were). ‘This is an unprecedented development, and understanding it could not help but advance the Greater Good.’ He was standing behind Zyvan now, so his image no longer flared into insubstantiality around the sleeves of his robe, but the top of his head was losing focus instead, wavering in a fashion which made him look uncannily like an ornamental candle with a smoking wick.

‘Your support is greatly appreciated,’ I assured him, keeping a straight face with something of an effort.

‘And your recommendation will be taken into account,’ Zyvan added, stopping noticeably short of anything which smacked of ‘and acted upon.’

‘If we are to begin investigating the bio-ship fragment,’ Sholer reminded us, ‘then the sooner we begin, the better. Time is most definitely of the essence.’

‘Absolutely,’ I agreed. The sky beyond the armourglass window was beginning to turn purple, the colour of a fresh bruise, mottled with the first few stars to come out, most of which were probably orbiting warships, reflecting the light of the disappearing sun like a constellation of small but deadly moons. The onset of night intensified my apprehension; although the chances of an unsuspected tyranid horde scuttling out of the darkness were miniscule, and the shrine was protected from the approach of anything inimical by auspex arrays of quite staggering sensitivity, my primal hindbrain was preparing to huddle round the campfire with a nice sharp rock close to hand. ‘So far as I’m concerned, the sooner you get on with it the better.’

‘I concur,’ El’hassai said, from the relative security of a couple of hundred

vertical kilometres away.

‘And Dysen tells me he trusts your judgement,’ Zyvan said to Sholer, in the tone of a man who knows a passed buck when he hears one. He sighed, heavily. ‘I still have my doubts about the wisdom of this. But under the circumstances, I don’t see that we have any choice. Do the best you can.’ He smiled, bleakly. ‘I suppose we can always sterilise the site from orbit if it all goes to the warp.’

Which, considering I was still standing there, was hardly the most cheering thing he could have said.

‘Any news of that shuttle?’ I asked, hoping the association of ideas wouldn’t be too obvious. ‘There’s nothing I can do here, apart from get under the Apothecary’s feet, and we’ve still got a war to fight.’

‘Last I heard, the Navy had some flight time freeing up,’ Zyvan said. ‘We can probably get a shuttle away to pick you up in the next couple of hours.’

‘Best news I’ve had all day,’ I told him accurately, still gazing out of the window across the darkening landscape. Night was falling in earnest now, and I traced the faint trail of a shooting star somewhere out over the desert. There would be plenty more over the next few nights, as the debris from the battle in orbit spiralled in, incinerating as it plummeted through the atmosphere towards the ground.

Then I stiffened, my eyes narrowing. The first bright streak across the sky was followed by another, and another, falling as thick and fast as rain in a thunderstorm. I turned back to the hololith, my panicked questions dying on my lips. Zyvan was standing, talking to someone outside the range of the projection field, while the insubstantial figure of the tau diplomat hovered on its fringes, flickering in and out of existence like a warp wraith trying to cling to its handhold in reality.

‘Something’s wrong,’ Sholer said, his eyes still fixed on the miniature drama being enacted on the tabletop.

‘Very,’ I agreed. ‘Take a look outside.’

‘Holy Throne!’ he said, succinctly. ‘That looks like—’

‘The second wave’s just hit,’ Zyvan informed us. ‘Far heavier than the last one.’

‘Of course,’ I said, recognising the typical tyrannid tactic. This time round they’d try to get enough organisms on the ground to really stretch our dirtside defences, gathering the information they needed to completely overwhelm us on the next try, or the one after that, or the one after that. In

the meantime they'd be creating beachheads, allowing the swarms to grow, and begin harvesting the biomass they needed to swell their ranks still further. I tried to make my next remark sound like a joke, already knowing the answer, but clinging to the hope that it wouldn't be the one I expected. 'I take it my lift's postponed?'

'Fraid so,' Zyvan said, taking the pleasantry at face value. 'You'll have to sit this one out too.'

But, as I stared at the flickering lights in the sky, I didn't think for one moment that that would be an option.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



From *The Crusade and After: A Military History of the Damocles Gulf*, by Vargo Royz, 058.M42.

The second tyranid assault hit Fecundia with a ferocity the beleaguered defenders could scarcely withstand, losing several of the lighter vessels to acid or bio-plasma discharges even before the fleets closed. Through these gaps in the defensive line poured uncountable numbers of mycetic spores, each loaded with lethal organisms, infecting the planet below like viruses finding a vulnerable host, while the living starships tried to engage the survivors at close quarters with claws and tentacles, or launched boarding parties in an attempt to harvest the crews.

Though faltering, however, the line did not break, the gallant starfarers of the Imperial Navy retaliating with lance, broadside and torpedo, tearing the hearts out of untold numbers of the void-spawned abominations. Even the merchant vessels still in orbit used their relatively puny armament to good effect, forming themselves into ad hoc squadrons whose combined firepower was sufficient to cripple, and in a few cases kill, those tyranid monstrosities incautious enough to consider them defenceless.

Nevertheless, the battle in space was a close-run thing, and could easily have had quite another outcome had it not been for the unexpected and decisive intervention of Commissar Cain who, at the point the battle began, had more than enough to concern him as the invasion of the surface got under way.



## TWENTY-FIVE

‘Looks like we’re a prime target,’ I said, trying to keep my voice level, as the number of contact icons grew around the glowing rune marking our position in the hololith.

‘We are,’ Yail agreed, sounding as happy as a Space Marine ever is when faced with overwhelming odds, which isn’t exactly cheerful, but a lot more sanguine about it than I generally am. No doubt because, from their point of view, it’ll either result in a heroic victory or a glorious last stand, both of which will go down well in the annals of their Chapter.

‘They’re targeting the bio-ship fragment,’ Sholer said, sounding almost as concerned about his lump of meat as our own safety, which I have to confess was my main concern at this point. ‘What’s our state of readiness?’

‘As good as it can be,’ I told him, knowing he’d be as aware as I was of just how inadequate that was likely to prove. ‘The skitarii have finished laying minefields, and are dug in around our perimeter.’ Rather than me, I added silently to myself.

‘My battle-brothers and I will be joining them,’ Yail added, ‘as soon as the tactical situation has become clear enough to know where we will be most needed.’

‘What about the Land Speeder?’ I asked, turning my attention to the pict screen, across which the darkened dunescape was scudding. The scout vehicle had been flying round in circles for the last hour or so, sending back increasingly pessimistic reports about the number of creatures heading our way from the scattered spores – not just vanguard organisms like gaunts and

lictors this time, but scores of termagants, and the larger warrior forms to herd them. This time we'd be facing an army capable of coordinating itself and shooting from a distance, not an instinct-driven swarm desperate to close. There were even a few unconfirmed sightings of larger creatures, capable of taking on an armoured vehicle, if we'd had one, or, more cogently, tearing their way through whatever defences we'd manage to put in place before they arrived. Formidable as the walls of the shrine were, they'd been built to withstand an assault by nothing more threatening than the elements,<sup>170</sup> and I couldn't see them holding for long against a brood of carnifexes determined to breach them.

'Standing by to provide fire support,' Yail assured me. After some discussion, we'd agreed that the fast-moving flyer would be best employed once the expected assault began in trying to pick off the larger creatures coordinating the others, in the hope of disrupting whatever strategy they were attempting to use against us. That would entail remaining fast enough, and high enough, to avoid any ground-to-air fire the swarm might bring to bear, of course. We could only hope that the superior range of the heavy bolters and missile launchers, and matchless marksmanship of the Adeptus Astartes, would be equal to the task.

'What about the landship?' I asked, catching sight of the harvester still parked alongside the shrine, like a dinghy bobbing next to a wharf. 'Can we use that to evacuate the tech-priests?' Who would, of course, need a military escort to ensure their safety, a job for which I considered myself the prime candidate.

'That has already been considered,' Sholer said, 'but their chances of getting through are extremely low.'

'I imagine so,' I said, having thought as much, but it never hurt to ask. The huge, lumbering machine would be an easy target for the swarm, which would simply keep pace alongside, throwing bodies at it until they tore their way through the hull. After that, it would all be over. 'Then what do we do with it?' I added. 'It's blocking our fire lanes, and giving them enough cover to mass for an attack.'

'Detonate the reactor,' Yail said. 'The specimens caged inside will attract others, so if we time it right, we should take out a considerable number of the attacking swarm.'

'The crew's already been evacuated into the shrine,' Sholer added.

'Glad to hear it,' I said, as if I actually cared one way or the other. 'How



are you getting on with defrosting the bio-ship fragment?’

‘Slowly,’ Sholer admitted. ‘It’s been dug out of the ice, but we needed heavy lifting equipment to move something that size, and our analyticae simply aren’t big enough to get it into. We’ve had to move our equipment into one of the storage bays in order to study it.’

‘Show me,’ I said, calling up a three-dimensional plan of the shrine on the hololith as I spoke. It sounded like the perfect place to avoid, and I wanted to make sure I stayed as far away from it as possible. Sholer poked the controls, and highlighted a large, vaulted area near the top of the structure. I stared at it in surprise. ‘I thought you’d keep it down in the sub-levels.’

‘The higher the better,’ he said, ‘as the tyranids don’t appear to have any flying creatures among them.’

‘Not yet,’ I said, ‘but they will.’ One thing certain about the ’nids was that whatever problem you presented them with, they’d have a creature perfectly adapted to dealing with it spawned and ready to go within hours.

‘The chamber connects to the main cargo lift,’ Sholer said, pointing to a wide shaft extending all the way from the lowest sub-level to the flight deck on the roof. ‘We can return it to the cryogenitorium easily enough if we have to.’

‘Good enough,’ I said, hoping I sounded as though I meant it. If we had winged organisms fighting their way down from the hangars, and the bulk of the swarm scrambling up from below, we’d have nowhere to go in any case. I turned back to Yail. ‘Better get all the non-combatants into the mid-levels, and be ready to seal off the lower ones,’ I said. That should buy us a little time if the swarm broke through. Or, more likely, I tried not to think, when they did.

‘I agree,’ he said. ‘Although we should arm as many of the acolytes as we can. It will make them feel less vulnerable, and lack of accuracy is hardly going to be an issue if the swarm does gain entry.’ Which was an understatement if ever I heard one.

We didn’t have long to wait for the first attack, which came less than an hour later. The night beyond the sheet of armourglass making up one wall of the shrine’s main operations centre was suddenly lit up by a series of vivid flashes, like far-off lightning, accompanied by a low rumbling sound which made the window vibrate almost imperceptibly. In fact, I’d never have felt it, if I hadn’t had my fingertips pressed against the slick,

transparent surface as I craned my neck for a better view.

‘Looks like they found the minefield,’ Jurgen opined, handing me a more than welcome mug of recaff.

I took it, and nodded my thanks. ‘It does,’ I said, opening a vox-link to Yail, who was off somewhere in the darkness looking for ‘nids to pot. ‘Contact in sector three,’ I told him crisply, then added ‘but I imagine you noticed that,’ in my best wryly humorous tone, as though I was eager to be out there with him. But someone had to watch the hololith, keeping an eye on the overall tactical picture, and for that job, to my vastly unspoken relief, we’d had a wide choice of me. I’d fought the ‘nids before, and could pick out the patterns of movement that betokened an incipient charge, or a flanking attempt, better than anyone except possibly Yail, and his place was alongside his battle-brothers, not sitting out the fight in relative safety. His sense of honour would never have permitted that.

‘We have it covered,’ he assured me, although from the hololith display it looked more like he and the rest of the Reclaimers were just offering themselves up as an appetiser for the first ‘nid arrivals. His last couple of words were almost drowned out as the speeder howled in from the south, unloading a blizzard of fire into the heart of the milling swarm, and pulled away again in the nick of time, rolling to avoid a barbed strangler pod fired by something in the press below. The living warhead burst in mid-air, spewing out an expanding mass of razor-edged tendrils which plummeted back into the heaving crowd of deadly organisms, ripping those it entangled apart with its fearsome thorns, which didn’t seem to disconcert the others in the slightest.

I could make out very little of the horde surrounding us, the encircling mass reduced by the darkness to a single amorphous stain on the landscape, which seemed to seethe like an angry sea as highlights struck briefly from one piece of chitin or another. I found myself obscurely grateful for the lack of clarity, as seeing that unstoppable tide of malevolence for what it was, and being able to pick out individual creatures within it, would have been far more unnerving.

‘Commissar,’ one of the red-robed acolytes manning the lecterns called, somehow managing to inject a tone of apologetic diffidence into his mechanical voice, ‘it appears we have a problem.’

‘No, really?’ I asked, tearing myself away from the window with some reluctance. The inexorable creep of the advancing wall of death beyond it

had become curiously hypnotic. Then, reflecting that sarcasm wasn't exactly calculated to inspire already terrified civilians, I plastered a smile on my face, as though I'd meant it for a joke. 'Are we running out of recaff already?'

'A serious problem,' the cogboy insisted, predictably having had the sense of humour bypass common to his kind. He was carrying a welding torch in his mechadendrites, the makeshift weapon, and hundreds more like it, having been the closest we'd been able to come to Yail's suggestion of boosting morale by arming the tech-priests, and poked at the dials and switches in front of him with calloused and stubby fingers. Something about the intensity with which he was working worried me, and I hurried across the wide, high room, Jurgen trotting at my heels.

'What?' I asked, finding the display in front of him as incomprehensible as I'd expected. Jurgen leaned in for a closer look at the wobbling dials, his brow furrowing in bafflement, and the cogboy flinched, apparently still in possession of his sense of smell.

'I'm getting traces of movement in the cryogenitorium,' he said. 'Something's moving around down there.'

'Frak on a stick,' I said, seeing no reason not to express my disquiet in the most forthright possible terms. If anything, the short burst of profanity seemed to reassure the cogboy, probably because he'd been worrying about bothering me unnecessarily. 'They're waking up!' I retuned my comm-bead. 'Apothecary, we're reading movement in the deep freeze,' I said. 'Is the node waking up?'

'Not as such,' Sholer said, 'that would imply a sense of individual consciousness, which tyranids don't possess.' Not for the first time, I found myself regretting that it wasn't possible to strangle someone over a vox-link. 'But we are registering cortical activity, which is increasing in strength by the minute.'

'Then that's what's reviving the specimens,' I concluded.

'A reasonable hypothesis,' he conceded. 'But most are too deeply embedded in the ice to free themselves.'

'They don't have to,' I reminded him. 'You've got burrowers down there. They'll break it up enough for the others to get out.'

'Then we have a serious problem,' Sholer said.

Before I could congratulate him on his acuity, the entire room seemed to tremble, while a deafening rumble shuddered through my bones. A vivid

fireball blossomed beyond the sheet of armourglass, against which debris clanged and clattered, leaving a few faint chips and streaks even in that phenomenally tough surface.

‘There goes the harvester,’ Jurgen remarked, in conversational tones.

‘We’re pulling back,’ Yail voxed, almost at the same moment. ‘We can’t hold them any longer.’

‘Then don’t try,’ I advised, after a quick glance at the hololith. The noose was tightening all around us, and unless they moved fast, they’d be cut off within a handful of moments. The Land Speeder was swooping and diving beyond the wide window, covering their retreat with strategic blurts of fire, and by the light of the burning landship I could see an unstoppable tide of chitin sweeping towards our fragile bastion from all directions. ‘As soon as you’re inside, we’re sealing the lower levels.’

‘Acknowledged,’ Yail said, not bothering to ask why. If he’d been monitoring my conversation with Sholer he’d already know, and if he hadn’t, I was pretty sure he’d be able to work it out. ‘We’ll be with you in ten.’

As it turned out, it was a couple of minutes more than that before the towering bulk of the Space Marine was looming over me again, his Terminator armour looking even more battered than before. Several of the rockets were missing from the shoulder-mounted launchers too, which in itself stood as mute testament to the ferocity of the fight he and his comrades had put up.

‘I’m recording more movement below,’ the welder-wielding cogboy piped up from behind his lectern, and I tilted my neck to converse with Yail.

‘Looks like you got back in the nick of time,’ I said. I turned back to the hololith, and called up the schematic of the shrine Sholer had shown us in the conference room so short a time before. Several internal doors were marked in red, to my considerable relief. ‘All the doors have been welded shut.’

‘That’ll buy us a breathing space,’ Yail agreed. ‘We’ll set up pickets here, here, and here.’ He indicated a couple of choke points, where corridors intersected. ‘Reclaimers here, and skitarii there.’

‘This junction would be better,’ I said, my innate affinity for complex corridor systems kicking in, and indicated an alternative to one of the points he’d suggested. ‘If the ’nids get into the ducting, they can bypass a post here.’

‘Good point,’ Yail said. ‘We’ll deploy there instead.’

‘Better hurry,’ I said, ‘it won’t take them long to climb half a dozen levels.’

‘But they’re not climbing,’ the cogboy put in. ‘Look.’

His instrumentation made no more sense to me than it had done the last time I looked, but Yail seemed able to read it without too much trouble. ‘No, they’re not,’ he said. ‘Can you transfer this to the hololith?’

The cogboy nodded, and a moment later contact icons began to appear, clustered in the lower levels of the schematic. ‘Best I can do,’ he said.

‘It’s good enough,’ I assured him, and turned to Yail. ‘They’re in the plasma vents.’

‘Some of them, anyway,’ the Space Marine agreed. ‘I doubt many will fit.’

‘They won’t have to,’ I reminded him, the picture of the huge serpentine burrower I’d found myself standing on the first time I’d visited the cryogenitorium fresh in my mind. ‘The trygon will leave them a tunnel to follow.’

‘Why are they heading for the surface?’ Jurgen asked. ‘They usually want to attack us as quick as they can.’

‘Because there’s more prey to be had outside,’ I said, with a sudden flare of realisation, ‘and the ones attacking us are just as eager to kill the bio-ship node. We’ll keep for both of them.’ Which was hardly a comforting thought in the long term, but if it gave us a respite now, I wasn’t going to argue.

‘There’s the first one,’ Jurgen said, returning to the window and looking down at the landscape below. Ignoring the sudden assault on my sinuses which joining him entailed, I stood next to him, and followed the direction of his grubby forefinger. As I did so, something fast and scuttling flung aside the grating it had just ripped from the nearest vent, and leapt at the unprotected back of the gun servitor still doggedly guarding it from the encroaching swarm. The construct fell in a flurry of slashing blows, flesh, bone and metal parting like morning mist, and its slayer bounded off into the darkness. ‘Stealer, you reckon?’

‘Could be,’ I said, as a dozen more bioforms swarmed out of the narrow opening, and followed their fellow. A brood of termagants, outnumbering them at least two to one, and being herded by one of the hulking warrior forms, turned their fleshborers on them, bringing the first few down, then the purestrains were among them, slashing and tearing at their prey.

‘Structural breach,’ the cogboy said, and for one terrifying moment I

thought he meant that the swarm below had changed their minds and decided to come after us instead. But the icons on the hololith were moving out, beyond the subterranean boundaries of the shrine.

‘The burrowers are loose,’ Jurgen remarked, as though commenting on the weather, and a moment or two later I saw something monstrously huge surfacing within the heart of the swarm, knocking uncountable scuttling horrors from their feet. Some fell into its gaping maw, others were mashed to paste beneath its gargantuan coils, then it was gone again, leaving only an eddy of disorientated abominations on the surface to mark its passing.

‘They seem to be targeting the synapse creatures,’ Yail said, and I nodded.

‘Just the same tactics we’d employ,’ I agreed, although the two swarms seemed able to exploit one another’s vulnerabilities with an instinctive speed and precision we could only gasp at. ‘But this can’t go on for long.’

‘It can’t,’ the Adeptus Astartes sergeant agreed. ‘We just have to hope that the loser weakens the victor sufficiently to tip the odds in our favour.’

‘It’ll have to tip ’em a long way to keep this place secure with little more than a mob of cogboys waving sharpened sticks,’ I said, ‘even with you and your men to lead them.’<sup>171</sup>

‘And you,’ Yail reminded me.

‘We’re just prolonging the inevitable,’ I said, switching the hololith back to the overall strategic view to emphasise the point. ‘So long as that bio-ship fragment is here, they’ll just keep on coming.’ The scrimmage in orbit seemed just as desperate and bloody, the hive fleet pressing the Navy hard, although at least it looked as though no more spores were falling. I switched the view again, to the region surrounding us. ‘There are more ’nids inbound all the time.’ I zoomed the image, taking in a cluster of contact icons scuttling towards us as fast as their legs could carry them. ‘This group could have joined the assault on the main hive, but it’s coming here instead.’

‘We need reinforcements,’ Yail said, scanning the datafeed for any unengaged units, and coming up as empty as I had.

‘Or we need to evacuate,’ I added. He looked at me as though I’d suddenly started talking orkish, so I waved an expansive hand, taking in all the tech-priests surrounding us. ‘This place is full of non-combatants, whose ministry is desperately needed to keep the forges running. If nothing else, we have to ensure their safety.’ And mine too, although I didn’t think it politic to mention that.

‘Fecundia is being overrun by tyranids,’ Yail said, still sounding bemused.

‘We are hardly likely to find a safe refuge for them anywhere else.’

‘Anywhere else has got to be safer than the ’nids’ primary target,’ I countered. I gestured towards the tactical display again. ‘The main hives are being successfully defended, at least for the moment.’

At which point, I finally heard a welcome voice in my ear. ‘Ciaphas,’ Zyvan asked, ‘are you still there?’

‘Hanging on,’ I replied. ‘Watching a little tyranid civil war from the windows.’ It was still raging unabated, although sooner or later the superior numbers of the invaders were bound to tell. Not far away a brood of carnifexes was charging ponderously home against the flanks of a transplanted tyrannofex, which staggered and fell, retaliating with a withering barrage of fleshborers which began to devour its attackers instantly. Maddened with the pain of their wounds, the hulking slabs of muscle and bone staggered drunkenly, and charged again at random, crushing a group of their own hormagaunts as they went. ‘Quite a pleasant change to see them ripping into one another.’

‘No doubt,’ the Lord General said, sounding strained, ‘but we’re not so lucky. We’re barely holding on up here, and the leviathans at the heart of the fleet have just come into auspex range. Unless we can come up with something in the next couple of hours, it looks like we’re finished.’

‘So I take it evacuating the civilians will be out of the question?’ I asked, getting precisely the answer I expected.

‘You take it right,’ Zyvan said, sounding appropriately touched by my non-existent concern for the non-combatants; but under the circumstances I could hardly ask about being able to make a run for it myself. In the unlikely event of getting out of this undigested, I had a reputation to maintain, and if a chance did come up to save my own neck, it’d be a lot harder to take if I’d undermined Yail’s trust in me beforehand. ‘The Navy’s got its hands full, and even if we could get a shuttle away, it’d be downed before it hit the atmosphere.’

‘Then we’ll hold on as long as we can,’ I said. Which was all good sinew-stiffening stuff, just the kind of quietly understated declaration of resolve someone like me was supposed to say in situations like this. I glanced at the hololith, seeing the swirl of the internecine battle to the death unfolding like a clash between storm fronts. ‘We’ll upload our tactical data, and keep it coming in real time. If we do go down fighting, the analysts might be able to make something out of it.’

‘Standing by to receive,’ Zyvan said, and cut the link, rather hastily, I thought.<sup>172</sup>

‘A good suggestion,’ Yail said. ‘I’ll advise Apothecary Sholer to prepare whatever results his researches yield for transmission too. It would be regrettable if any useful information was lost at the last minute.’

‘It would indeed,’ I said, thinking it would be a damn sight more regrettable if I was. I spoke absently, though, my attention almost entirely on the ebb and flow of the contact icons in the hololith, as my subconscious struggled to bring something about them into focus. I glanced out of the window, where the epic clash of chitin was still illuminated by the flickering glare of the immolating harvester, translating the movements of the icons into those of the actual creatures, and realisation suddenly struck, like one of the secondary explosions going off around the wreck. ‘Look at that!’

‘They’re giving it some, all right,’ Jurgen agreed, completely missing the point, which was nothing new, but Yail was looking puzzled too.

‘All I can see is tyranids killing one another,’ he said, with a faint air of resentment, as though he didn’t see why they should have all the fun.

‘But it’s how they’re doing it,’ I said. I pointed at a particularly egregious example. ‘Look at those termagants.’ A brood of the invaders was firing its fleshborers at an advancing tervigon, the towering creature’s thick armour plating shrugging the incoming hail of deadly beetles off with almost contemptuous ease, although several of the newly-spawned termagants scuttling around its feet fell, while the others returned fire with fleshborers of their own. Abruptly the target brood scattered and ran, taking what cover it could.

‘That’s typical instinctive behaviour,’ Yail reminded me, still none the wiser, and I nodded.

‘But they had one of the big warrior forms with them,’ I said, pointing it out just before the tervigon bit it in half, chewing and swallowing its impromptu snack with every sign of relish. ‘It should have been directing them, overriding the instinctive response.’

‘It should.’ Yail nodded, in sudden understanding. ‘The presence of the node from the bio-ship must be inhibiting the hive fleet’s ability to pass on instructions.’

‘Jamming it, like we do with enemy vox-channels,’ I agreed. I made for the door, with a fine show of decisiveness. ‘We need to talk to the



Apothecary right away.'

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## TWENTY-SIX

Sholer's makeshift analyticum turned out to be pretty much as I'd expected: a large, echoing space the size of a shuttle bay, the cargo pallets usually stacked there either pushed into the corners or pressed into service as improvised tables and workbenches, at which crimson-robed acolytes of the Ommissiah were toiling away diligently, doing Emperor knew what. Cabling ran everywhere, with the typical cogboy's indifference to either trip hazards or the danger of accidental electrocution, although I suppose the latter would hardly inconvenience anyone with so high a proportion of mechanical to organic components. If anything, it would probably perk them up a bit.<sup>173</sup>

The middle of the chamber was dominated by the bio-ship fragment, a vast chunk of necrotising meat, which towered more than twice my height. In fact it would be no exaggeration to say that it was roughly the size of a Baneblade overall, though less firmly defined. Noisome fluids seeped from it constantly, trickling into a hastily-drilled hole in the floor, from which a steady splashing sound indicated that they were being collected in a vat of some kind.<sup>174</sup> Needless to say, the stench was indescribable. The whole thing was studded with metal spikes driven deep into the mound of flesh, from which a forest of wires ran to banks of instrumentation, the displays of which were being intently studied by Sholer and his gaggle of assistants, a few of whom I recognised from the analyticum downstairs.

'Commissar,' he greeted me, with manifest surprise, as I bustled in, Jurgen at my heels. It was, perhaps, a measure of how overpowering the stench

was that I had to turn to make sure my aide was still there. ‘I assume your presence means an unexpected development?’

‘It does,’ I assured him. I’d petitioned the machine-spirit of my data-slate to keep watch on the tactical information we were uploading to Zyvan’s command centre aboard the flagship, and handed it over hurriedly, with a nod towards the kopje of diseased flesh looming over us as I spoke. ‘We think this thing’s jamming the influence of the hive fleet. I need to know how, and if we can exploit it.’

Sholer glanced at the slate for a moment, assessing the tactical data as rapidly and comprehensively as only an Adeptus Astartes could, then handed it back, with a cursory nod. ‘Intriguing,’ he said, and turned to one of the flickering data displays. ‘The main instances of disruption appear to correspond with neural activity on these frequencies.’ The regular wave patterns dissolved into meaningless static, and Sholer frowned. ‘Equipment malfunction,’ he said. ‘Hardly surprising, given how quickly it was all moved and reassembled.’

‘Jurgen,’ I said, divining the probable cause,<sup>175</sup> ‘could you find me a recaff somewhere? And you’d better get something for yourself while you’re about it. It looks like being a long night.’

‘Of course, sir,’ he said, and slouched out. The display steadied.

Sholer gave it a couple of extra whacks to be on the safe side, and turned back to me. ‘This is a very promising line of enquiry.’

‘Which is going to be terminated in pretty short order, if the creatures outside have their way,’ I reminded him. ‘How can we use it now?’

‘We’d need to boost and transmit the signal,’ he told me, clearly intrigued by the possibilities; something I’d have found a good deal more encouraging if he wasn’t still treating it as an abstract problem to be solved for the fun of it, rather than the urgent matter of our survival. ‘Unfortunately, transmitting a psychic signal isn’t quite as simple as sending a vox.’

‘Use a psyker, then,’ I said. ‘You’re not going to tell me an installation as sensitive as this one doesn’t have an astropath on staff?’

The Apothecary nodded.

‘Of course there is,’ he agreed. ‘But I don’t see what good it’ll do. She won’t be able to read a thing from it, let alone act as a relay. The warp shadow’s got us completely cut off.’

‘No harm in asking her, though, is there?’ I demanded, with rather more

asperity than I'd intended.

'None whatever,' Sholer said.

Though I've never been particularly comfortable in the company of astropaths, I was more than happy to see this particular one, who strolled into the analyticum with complete confidence, stepping over the cables lying in wait for the unwary without so much as a flicker of her sightless eyes. Like most of her kind, her age was indeterminate, the skin of her face etched with faint stress lines, although the faint stubble on her shaven head was dark where it shouldered its way through the tattooed icon of the Emperor, no doubt intended to invoke his protection. 'You must be Cain,' she said, turning her head in my direction, and adroitly sidestepping a scuttling CAT as she did so.

'I must,' I agreed, debating for a moment whether to extend a hand in greeting, before deciding against it. Her preternatural senses would probably make her aware of the gesture, but if they didn't, I'd look like an idiot. Then she extended hers, to precisely the right position for me to take with the least amount of difficulty. 'Good of you to come.'

'It's not as though I had a lot else to do,' she said, with a faint smile, as I released her hand after a perfunctory shake. Even through my glove, I thought I could feel a faint tingling sensation, although I suppose that could have been my imagination. Without Jurgen around I felt unusually vulnerable, even though I knew intellectually that she couldn't read my mind directly. I'd made sure my aide was occupied elsewhere, however, as his presence would have been sure to disrupt proceedings. I'd known psykers have a seizure in his vicinity, and even if our astropath wasn't simply poleaxed by his aura of psychic nullity, she'd certainly recognise him for what he was, a development Amberley was sure to take the dimmest of views of.<sup>176</sup> 'Clementine Drey.'

'We need you to transmit something,' Sholer explained, and Clementine's face took on a puzzled expression, deepening the delicate tracery of barely-perceptible lines across her face into full visibility, adding a couple of decades to her apparent age in an instant.

'I can't push a message through the shadow,' she said, as though explaining to a child that space was black.

'We know,' I said. 'We just want you to send it out there regardless.' If I'd said we wanted her to contact the hive mind, she'd probably go completely

to pieces, leaving us no better off than we were now.

‘Transmit blind?’ Clementine asked, apparently unconscious of the irony, and looking no happier. She clearly wasn’t an idiot, and probably had an inkling of what we were after. She turned, looking uncannily as if she was studying the bio-ship fragment with her sunken eye sockets. ‘You want me to try contacting that?’

‘Could you?’ I asked, trying not to sound too eager, and she shook her head.

‘There’s nothing there. It’s like...’ she paused, groping for an analogy. ‘It’s like a hole in the room. There’s just nothing to sense, like a fragment of the shadow itself.’

Sholer and I looked at one another. I don’t know how he was feeling, but I was close to despair. How could the astropath pass on the signal from the bio-ship fragment when she couldn’t even perceive it? Then my eye fell on the array of instrumentation, and their scurrying, red-robed attendants.

‘Can you read those instruments?’ I asked, hardly daring to hope.

‘Of course.’ Clementine looked puzzled again, though how she was able to perceive them at all was beyond me. ‘It’s simply data flow. The kind of thing I encode for transmission all the time.’

‘Can you do it in real time?’ I asked, and her expression began to border on the scornful.

‘Easily,’ she said.

‘Right now?’ I asked, thumbing my palm for the answer I wanted to hear.

‘Find me a seat,’ Clementine said, in a resigned tone. She turned her head. ‘And I’d appreciate a little privacy. The process can be unpleasant to witness.’ By which she meant unpleasant to experience, if I was any judge, having had more than a little experience of polite misdirection myself. Sholer went off to chivvy the rest of the cogboys away, while I heaved a couple of the smaller crates around to screen off the main workstation from eyes other than our own.

By the time I’d finished, Clementine had settled in a chair before the lectern, staring through the pict screen as if she could see the individual electrons pinging about in it. For all I knew, perhaps she could.

‘Commissar,’ Jurgen’s voice sounded urgently in my comm-bead. ‘The ’nids are finishing off the last of the ones we thawed out, and most of them are moving on the shrine.’ His words were punctuated by the hissing roar of the melta firing. ‘Some have already broken through in the lower corridors.’

‘It has to be now,’ I said, as Sholer rejoined us. ‘The other group’s on the way up to kill this thing.’ As if to underline my words, the muffled roar of a bolter echoed from somewhere beneath my feet.

‘They’re in the lift shaft,’ Yail’s voice chimed in, unnecessarily, as my innate sense of direction had pinpointed the source of the firing. I pictured the wide, deep void, plunging all the way down to the lower levels, providing the invading tyrannids with the most direct route possible to where we were sitting.

‘How long can you hold them for?’ I asked, drawing my weapons.

‘Long enough, I hope,’ Yail replied, before cutting the link, no doubt having a good deal more to concentrate on than idle conversation.

‘Ready,’ Clementine said, looking far from happy, as the sounds of distant firing redoubled. ‘I’ll just keep echoing whatever comes in through the feed, although Throne knows what you expect to pick it up.’ Her mouth moved, in some litany peculiar to her caste, then her body spasmed, as though she was throwing a fit, every muscle locking rigid with startling suddenness. She slipped from the chair, smacking her head on the edge of a nearby crate, and opening an ugly wound, which Sholer moved to staunch. A thin trickle of drool, admixed with blood from her bitten tongue, oozed slowly from the corner of her mouth.

‘I’ll tend her,’ Sholer said, looking up, and catching sight of me with my weapons at the ready, no doubt assuming I was desperate to join the fray, instead of just paranoid about being caught by the first ’nids to make it through the door. Come to think of it, there was only one entrance to the chamber. Once they got inside, my chances of getting out would be minimal, and the huge, putrescent mass of their prime target would be drawing them like kroot to carrion. ‘You may join the defensive line.’

‘If you’re sure,’ I said, careful not to overplay the gallantry to the point where I’d be incontrovertibly stuck here.

‘Completely,’ Sholer said, and drew his bolt pistol, more than ready for the fray. Seizing my opportunity, I sprinted from the room.

The corridor outside was full of panicking cogboys, running around in a fashion uncannily reminiscent of the aftermath of the escape of the genestealers. Confusingly, as many seemed to be running towards the sound of the Reclaimers’ bolter fire as away from it, something I at first attributed to a misplaced desire to get stuck in with the improvised weapons most of

them were brandishing. Looking around, I saw everything from hastily adapted tools to simple lengths of piping weighted to create heavier clubs, often supplemented with a spike or two, vicious enough to have gladdened the heart of any ork. A few carried more sophisticated armaments, perhaps scavenged from repair shops or hastily assembled from scratch, with bolt pistols and makeshift grenades fashioned from lubricant cans being popular choices. One fellow had even provided himself with a crossbow, which wouldn't have looked out of place in the scavvy camps of the sump.<sup>177</sup>

Having no desire to meet any tyranids head-on myself, I forced my way through the crush away from the sounds of combat, only to discover my error, for a living nightmare was blocking the corridor ahead of me, screeching in furious frustration as it battered against the ceiling and walls with leathery wings. It seemed I'd been right, and the invading hive mind hadn't taken long to deploy gargoyles against us. I raised my laspistol, cracking off a couple of shots as it rose above the heads of the cogboys blocking my line of fire, but all that succeeded in doing was drawing its attention to me, which was far from what I had in mind.

Dropping the tech-priest it had been savaging, it swooped towards me, bringing up its fleshborer to vomit a charge of deadly beetles in my direction. Fortunately its aim was disrupted by a cogboy showing rather more initiative than good sense, who flung a weighted line at it, which wrapped around the forelimb wielding the living weapon and jerked it aside at the last possible instant. The rain of frantically chewing mandibles pattered harmlessly against the wall of the corridor, only a few strays and ricochets finding living flesh to burrow into. And, given that it was so liberally laced with metal, much good it probably did them.<sup>178</sup>

The gargoyle screeched again, and rounded on my unexpected deliverer, its stinger-tipped tail thrusting towards his or her abdomen.<sup>179</sup> One good turn deserved another, particularly with so many witnesses around, so I lashed out with my chainsword, severing the barb before it could penetrate and bringing up the weapon on the backswing to slash at the hovering terror's exposed underside. 'Hold on!' I called encouragingly, although the tech-priest showed no sign of letting go, hauling grimly on the line like a fisherman with the biggest catch of their entire life. A gout of foul-smelling entrails splattered the floor and my much-abused greatcoat, confirming once and for all that it was past salvaging, and the gargoyle battered at me with its leathery wings, trying and failing to bring the fleshborer to bear once

more. Seeing its head turn, I ducked, letting the crown of my cap take the gobbet of venom it suddenly spat with the intention of burning my eyes out, and retaliated with another swipe of the chainsword. This time the screaming blade slashed the wing open from top to bottom, spilling the air, and the creature fell heavily to the floor, fluttering about in the slick of its own innards like a sparrow taking a bath.

‘Finish it!’ the tech-priest urged, the even mechanical voice somehow imbued with bloodlust, and leapt forwards, pinning the fleshborer under a mechanical foot with such weight and energy that the sculpted flesh burst like a ripe fruit. That was all the urging the others needed, and they fell on the downed creature like a pack of sump rats on a corpse, hacking and bludgeoning it to paste with club and blade.

‘They’re almost at the top of the shaft, sir,’ Jurgen reported, the sounds of combat echoing hollowly in the background through the tiny vox-receiver in my ear, and I vacillated for a moment before responding. The gargoyle could have been alone, but I doubted it, and if one had found its way inside from the landing platform, the rest of its brood wouldn’t be far behind. Even if they weren’t, there was nothing on the flight deck capable of taking to the air, and I’d simply choke to death in the miasmal atmosphere<sup>180</sup> if the airborne monstrosities didn’t get me first. On the other hand, perilous as joining the defence of the lift shaft would be, at least I’d have Jurgen’s melta and the surviving Reclaimers to hide behind.

‘I’ll be right there,’ I replied, as though I’d never had a moment’s hesitation, and trotted away in the direction of the shooting.

To my surprise a lot of the red robes surrounding me came along too, their blood and lubricants all fired up, apparently eager to bag another ’nid or two, now they’d had a taste of bloodshed. Which was fine by me – the more the merrier, particularly if they were standing between me and the swarm.

I glanced into Sholer’s sanctum as we swept past, but he was still crouched over Clementine’s spasming body, partially obscured behind the screening crates. Even if he was aware of my presence, he seemed too busy to acknowledge it, so I just kept moving, my comet tail of cogboys streaming out behind.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ I said, as I joined Yail, a couple of Reclaimers, and Jurgen, all of whom were lined up along the Chimera-sized doorway to the freight elevator,<sup>181</sup> which had been cranked open to allow them an unrestricted field of fire. Fortunately, the hive mind was only throwing



creatures capable of climbing against us, which ruled out anything with ranged weapons, but for every hormagaunt or purestrain 'stealer which went plummeting back into the depths, another dozen kept right on coming. 'Gargoyle got in the way.'

'I know,' Yail said, 'the Land Speeder's trying to keep them away from the hangar,' which at least accounted for the absence of the other Reclaimers.<sup>182</sup>

I don't mind admitting I quailed a little as I looked down the vertiginous drop to the sub-levels so far below. The walls of the shaft were seething with chitin, scuttling upwards with malevolent purpose, their rending and scything claws clacking together in an almost deafening cascade of crepitation. The defenders kept pouring fire into them, which I lost no time in adding to with my laspistol, but for all the effect we were having we might just as well have been lobbing rocks. 'Can't we get the platform moving, and scrape them off?' I asked, taking the back of the head off a particularly persistent genestealer with a lucky shot clean through its gaping jaws.

'We already did,' Jurgen informed me, sending a melta blast through the torso of another, the thermal backwash sending a couple of the others tumbling back down the shaft by way of a bonus.

'So trying again would just bring them up faster,' Yail added, punctuating his words with a burst from his storm bolter, which sent half a dozen gaunts after them in bite-sized chunks.

'They seem to be moving fast enough already,' I said, feeling a bit of heroic understatement would go down well about now.

A faint explosion echoed up the shaft. One of the cogboys had got over-excited and lobbed a home-made grenade down it, no doubt having calculated where in its trajectory it was likely to explode,<sup>183</sup> showering the 'nids with bits of broken metal.

'Not as fast as they were,' Jurgen observed, as though the matter were only of passing interest.

'They're slowing down?' I asked, a sudden flare of hope rising within me, and my aide nodded.

'They were sticking to the shadows before, using cover. Now they're just climbing straight into the line of the guns, so we're holding 'em off more easily.'

I tapped the vox-bead in my ear. 'Sholer,' I said, trying not to sound too exultant, 'it seems to be working. Is Clementine still transmitting?'

‘So far as I can tell,’ Sholer said. ‘She’s suffering continual seizures, each more violent than the last. Any one of them could prove fatal.’

‘Then we need to finish this fast,’ I said.

‘I concur.’ Yail’s head inclined a little, that being as close as he could come to a nod encased in the clumsy Terminator suit, and he triggered the remaining rockets in his cyclone rig in a single salvo. A second or so later a firestorm boiled up the shaft, crisping the chitinous horrors clinging to the sides of it even as they were shredded by the hail of shrapnel from the frag charges, and we leapt for our lives as the backwash boiled out through the open door. I hit the metal flooring and rolled, the furnace heat of the overlapping explosions searing my back, and came up, my laspistol pointed at the smoke-blackened portal. Only Yail still stood where he had been, protected from the fury of the blast by the finest armour known to man. After a moment, he spoke. ‘We have prevailed,’ he said simply.

‘We have?’ Strangely unwilling to believe it, I moved slowly to the edge of the abyss, and looked down. Sure enough, the only movement I could see was a few wounded stragglers squirming back into the vents at the bottom of the shaft which had evidently provided them with ingress.

‘Looks like it,’ Jurgen said, sending them on their way with a burst from his lasgun, his unique personal odour already beginning to displace the smell of charred flesh and scorched metal in my nostrils.

‘The gargoyles are also fleeing in disarray,’ Yail informed us, unable to keep a note of satisfaction from his voice.

‘Excellent,’ I said, doing a slightly better job of sounding businesslike; but then I’d had a lot more practice at hiding my feelings. I activated the comm-bead again. ‘You can tell Clementine to stand down.’

‘Unfortunately, I can’t,’ Sholer said, his voice tinged with regret. ‘As I anticipated, her last seizure proved fatal.’



From *The Crusade and After: A Military History of the Damocles Gulf*, by Vargo Royz, 058.M42.

Commissar Cain's flash of inspiration, and Astropath Drey's heroic sacrifice, were to have a far wider effect than either could possibly have anticipated. The inexorable advance of the hive fleet in orbit faltered as the coordinating intelligence lost control of the individual bio-ships, which began to react instinctively to their current circumstances instead of in pursuit of a wider strategy. The Imperial vessels, on the other hand, were still able to support one another, a tactical advantage they lost no time in exploiting. Rallying as many ships as he could, Admiral Boume began to directly engage the leviathans, which had been left vulnerable, though far from helpless, by the loss of their escorts, killing one and mauling the others so badly that they were forced to flee.

With their loss, the tyranid organisms on the ground reverted to their instinctive behaviour for the most part, only able to act as one in the presence of the synapse creatures sent to herd them, which, of course, became prime targets for the subsequent hunt. Though rumours persist of a few isolated organisms still lurking in the wastelands and the depths of the hive sumps, no reliable sightings have been recorded for nearly three decades, and Fecundia today is officially classified as cleansed. The Imperial Guard garrison established in the wake of the incident, and the indigenous skitarii, remain on the alert, however, for any signs of a fresh incursion.



## TWENTY-SEVEN

‘All rather satisfactory,’ I said, sipping my bowl of tanna, and regarding El’hassai through the steam as I contemplated the regicide board between us, a delaying tactic I was certain didn’t fool him for a minute. He was certainly a more challenging opponent than Zyvan, although whether that was because he simply didn’t think like a human, or his profession tended to encourage the use of misdirection and subtlety, I had yet to make up my mind. The Lord General had his hands full negotiating the terms under which the garrison we were leaving behind was supposed to co-operate with Kyper and his skitarii in cleansing Fecundia of the thousands of tyranid stragglers (not surprisingly, he was pressing for full autonomy for the Guard units, while Kyper was equally determined to keep operational matters firmly under his own jurisdiction), leaving him little time for socialising in the relative comfort of the flagship. Though El’hassai would hardly have been my first choice of dinner guest under most circumstances, there were a few outstanding matters nagging at the back of my mind that I felt we should discuss. Partly for my own satisfaction, and partly because I was ever mindful of my covert avocation as Amberley’s eyes and ears. If I was right in my suspicions, the Ordo Xenos would probably be quite interested in the conclusions I’d come to in the relatively quiet couple of weeks following the desperate battle in and around Regio Quinquaginta Unus. ‘A bloody nose for the ’nids, and the forge world successfully defended.’

‘Thanks to your ingenuity,’ the tau said, his attention apparently entirely on the move I made. He studied the board for a moment, and turned one of

my pieces, with an unmistakable air of satisfaction. 'And that of Apothecary Sholer. Unfortunately we seem unlikely to be able to use the same stratagem in the defence of other worlds.'

'Unfortunately so,' I agreed. The tau certainly couldn't, anyway, not having any astropaths to project a jamming signal with, and Sholer seemed pretty convinced that we needed a living hive node to produce one anyway, which weren't exactly thick on the ground. He was urging Kyper and the Death Korps to round up as many live tyranids as possible, to see if he could make the trick work with recorded or synthesised data, but so far would only allow that it was a promising line of enquiry, which could mean decades of research before anything useful emerged from the analyticum. Come to that, I couldn't see either Guardsmen or skitarii exactly falling over themselves to round up 'nids they could just as easily pot from a safe distance. 'But at least what's left of the hive fleet will be a lot easier for your ships to pick off when it hits Dr'th'nyr.'

'Especially since the astropath attached to the Imperial observers has given them adequate warning of its approach,' El'hassai said. He inclined his head courteously. 'For which we thank our allies, of course.'

'One good turn deserves another,' I said, turning a piece of his own. 'If you hadn't warned us the hive fleet was coming in the first place, Fecundia might easily have fallen.' I took another sip of tanna. 'In fact it almost did anyway, taking a substantial chunk of Battlefleet Damocles with it.' Which would have left half the Imperial systems in the Gulf open to an unopposed land grab by the tau. More than enough to compensate them for the loss of the single world they'd handed back to us on the brink of seizing it, and which they no doubt expected to regain before too long in any case.

'But it didn't,' El'hassai said evenly, studying the board again. 'And your ships are being refitted even as we speak.'

'Quite so.' I savoured another mouthful of the bitter liquid, and held out my tanna bowl, which Jurgen refilled with his usual quiet efficiency. 'Ready for our return to Quadravidia.'

'Quadravidia?' The tau diplomat tilted his head in a perfect imitation of human surprise. 'Surely it's adequately defended by the merchantmen delivering infrastructural enhancements?'

'A burden the unexpected survival of our warships can relieve them of,' I said. 'Just as the unexpected survival of Fecundia can relieve the tau empire of the burden of supporting an Imperial world. I'm sure those resources will

be far better employed in defending your borders against the tyrannids.'

If I'd been looking at a human face, I'm pretty sure the expressions I'd seen flickering across them would have been surprise, chagrin, and possibly amusement, but then he was a diplomat, and a xenos one to boot, so it's more than likely he was just projecting what he thought I wanted to see.

'Perhaps they will,' he said evenly. 'The tyrannids are a greater threat to both of us at the present time, than either of us is to the other. It's in both our interests to maintain the alliance against them.'

'Indeed it is.' I raised my tanna bowl in a good-humoured toast, which, after a moment, El'hassai echoed, with barely a trace of irony. 'You might almost say the Greater Good demands it.'

[On which somewhat frivolous note, this extract from the Cain archive comes to a typically self-congratulatory conclusion.]

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## NOTES

1. *Tau skin shades actually vary as much as human ones, though the majority appear somewhere in a range between pale grey and an even paler cerulean, a result of the role cobalt seems to play in their metabolism. Anyone interested in the physiological details can find more than they would ever wish to know in Magos Gandermak's pioneering paper Some Preliminary Conclusions Concerning the Haematology of the Tau, Imperial Journal of Xenobiology, Vol. MMMCCXXIX, Number 8897, pp 346 - 892, Rasmussen's Tentative Results of the Analysis of Tau Haemoglobin Free of Obvious Methodological Errors, Vol. MMMCCXXIX, Number 8899, pp 473 - 857, and the ensuing century and a half of increasingly acrimonious correspondence with the editor.*

2. *Though their relative positions in the somewhat tangled skeins of military protocol precluded anything as firm as out and out friendship, their relationship was somewhat warmer than Cain's words might imply; particularly by this point, in the last decade of the millennium, only five years from Cain's official and frequently interrupted retirement. They socialised as frequently as possible given the pressing nature of their respective duties, and undoubtedly enjoyed one another's company on such occasions.*

3. *An Imperial Guard staging world, where many of the campaigns Cain was involved in over the course of his career were planned and the forces for them assembled.*

4. 1. In fact most of the orbitals were still substantially intact, but the amount of debris around them made docking a starship problematic at best.

5. Despite Cain's clear cynicism, that is indeed how the tau themselves refer to their larger capital ships, which combine as much cargo space as a dedicated Imperial troop transport with the firepower of a battleship. An uncomfortable combination in planetary assaults, to say the least, although, as the Navy like to say, at least the defenders get to concentrate their fire against fewer targets.

6. System Defence Fleet.

7. Because, given Quadravidia's value to the Imperium as a transport hub, cities on the ground were less important than the orbital docks above them. Which, in turn, meant that they were built beneath the footprints of structures in geostationary orbit which, by definition, were positioned above a point on the equator.

8. From the aptly-named Settler's Bane, a planet teeming with inimical life forms among which the tribes of feral orks rate no higher than a minor nuisance.

9. An opinion shared by a number of later historians, although others assert with equal fervour that under the circumstances Braddick had little choice in the matter: any attempt to counter-attack at that point could just as easily have overstretched the defensive line, breaking it altogether.

10. Though an Imperial Guard soldier, and therefore obliged by regulation to follow the orders of a superior, Jurgen remained convinced that his position as the personal aide to a commissar was a de facto secondment to the Commissariat itself, removing him entirely from the chain of command, apart from on those occasions when he could see some advantage to being lost within it. Needless to say this was a position Cain was perfectly happy with, and few Guard officers would have been inclined to dispute the point.

11. A common misapprehension among Imperial citizens, who generally consider the relationship between the kroot, demiurg, and other races incorporated into the Tau Empire, and the tau themselves as something akin to that of the gretchin among orks: slaves or servants to do the dirty work their masters are unwilling to sully their hands with. In fact both the tau and their client races, which, let us not



*forget, includes a disturbingly high number of renegade humans, seem to consider them as equals; albeit the tau are clearly a little more equal than any of the others.*

*12. Probably a reference to the incident on Adumbria, where malicious accusations by another commissar led to a formal enquiry into Cain's conduct which, ironically, only added lustre to his reputation.*

*13. Not quite true, as the pilot sits in the heavily armoured torso; but given the anthropomorphic design of the tau battlesuit, it's easy to forget this, and assume it's up in the head, like the princeps of a miniature Titan.*

*14. Literally 'battlesuit unit fortuitous gale,' no doubt one of the semi-formal honourific titles tau units acquire to commemorate notable successes on the battlefield.*

*15. Completely impossible, of course, as Imperial Guard officers, however senior, don't have the authority to execute a commissar; although I suppose Cain can be forgiven the impulse to indulge in some obvious wordplay.*

*16. Primarily composed of Vostroyan and Harakoni regiments, supplemented by others raised from neighbouring worlds.*

*17. A couple due to Cain's direct, if reluctant, intervention, which no doubt went some way towards explaining the warmth with which the Lord General regarded him.*

*18. There are, indeed, few if any instances on record of out and out treachery by the tau in their dealings with other races, although they're not above a little self-serving confusion about the exact terms of whatever arrangement has been come to.*

*19. The tau who specialise in diplomacy and administrative tasks, maintaining social cohesion within the Tau Empire, and overseeing the smooth integration of conquered species. The closest Imperial equivalent would be a cross between the Administratum and the Ecclesiarchy, although the caste's responsibilities and remit go far beyond anything which that would imply, touching almost every aspect of life among the septs.*

*20. Word of the tau invasion had spread quickly, and the dozens of civilian vessels which would normally have arrived or departed each day changed their routes to avoid the Quadravidia system. Their new*

*paths through the warp were, of course, far slower, and the resulting economic disruption was to continue rippling through the sector for over a decade.*

*21. An uncharacteristic moment of introspection; presumably he was reminded of his own near-death in this manner during the First Siege of Perlia.*

*22. Though an undoubted goal of the invasion fleet, it was probably a secondary one. Tau planetary assaults make great use of assets in fixed orbit, and, more likely, they hoped to use the orbital as a gun platform, and to speed up the deployment of their ground forces by using it as a staging post.*

*23. For a fuller account of this incident, see Royz, chapter 17.*

*24. Big, certainly, but hardly that big.*

*25. Almost certainly an exaggeration for effect, although it's possible, pace his earlier remarks about the size of the vessels intended to use it, that he was simply misjudging the scale of his surroundings. A space that size could hardly be opened to vacuum and repressurised as regularly as required for commerce without considerable difficulty.*

*26. Enabling personnel to enter or leave while the hangar was decompressed, to speed up the arrival or departure of traffic.*

*27. Probably because the humans assimilated by the tau generally regard Imperials as uncouth barbarians, and she would have expected all Imperial Guardsmen to be like that.*

*28. One of the Imperial worlds whose annexation led to the Damocles Gulf Crusade; after a quarter of a millennium, it was hardly surprising the population had become as thoroughly assimilated as it appears here.*

*29. A matter of some debate among the xenopsychologists of the Ordo Xenos, some of whom hold to Cain's opinion, while others assert that the upper echelons of the tau are perfectly aware of the vast disparity between our two powers, but remain convinced of their ultimate victory regardless. Quite why any would be so deluded as to think that is beyond me, but it's certainly true that most denizens of their empire have a faith in the Greater Good no less strong than our own in His Divine Majesty.*

*30. Not entirely true, but such clashes are rare, and confined almost exclusively to Imperial invasions of tau worlds with a substantial*

*human element among the population.*

*31. Literally 'those who guide wisely.'*

*32. A Valhallan beverage, for which Cain had a particular and inexplicable liking.*

*33. Though many adjectives spring to mind concerning the flavour of tanna, 'delicate' is not one of them. It's like describing a Baneblade as 'dainty.'*

*34. Most unlikely; the water caste making a habit of preparing detailed psychological appraisals of anyone their diplomats are liable to come into contact with as a matter of course. Then again, they appeared to believe Cain's reputation was entirely genuine, so were clearly capable of being misdirected on occasion.*

*35. No area in or around the Damocles Gulf has this Imperial designation, so it seems El'hassai was translating the name from its tau equivalent. Since anywhere coreward of T'au would be on or near their border with the Imperium, this is hardly much help in fixing the location; if he was more precise, Cain doesn't mention it.*

*36. Or cultivated to put them at their ease during negotiations.*

*37. Not to be confused with the small drones commonly used by the fire caste and others, these are essentially self-guided torpedoes, just large enough to hold a databank, a gravitic drive, and a machine-spirit to pilot it; lacking astropaths, this is the only way for exploration vessels to remain in contact with their home worlds, other than taking full-sized courier ships along for the ride.*

*38. On the Eastern Fringe, at least, which would, naturally, be his main concern. Hive Fleet Leviathan's thrust up through the galactic plane would have little bearing on the immediate tactical situation in the Damocles Gulf.*

*39. It's unclear here whether he actually used the Imperial term, or Cain is simply translating with hindsight.*

*40. As was his habit, Zyvan had simply taken passage on the largest warship in the flotilla, commandeering the space he needed; an arrangement the Navy seemed as happy with as possible under the circumstances, no doubt reflecting that at least that way they got to keep an eye on whatever he was up to.*

*41. A cartographic convention which has led to occasional confusion, given that most Imperial tactical displays use red to mark contact with*

*the enemy; though few incidents were so embarrassing as the orbital bombardment of the Shrine of the Ommissiah on Kaftagrie, by an Imperial Navy flotilla under the erroneous impression that it had fallen to the Traitor Legion besieging it.*

*42. An exaggeration, but a pardonable one; it certainly manufactured a high proportion of the materiel used by Imperial Guard units in and around the Gulf, including lasguns, powercells, and most common variants of the Leman Russ.*

*43. In fact, the tau appear to have no psykers of any kind among them, although there is much speculation among the Ordo Xenos as to whether or not the Ethereal caste's ability to inspire and lead might be an entirely natural phenomenon, or have something of the warp about it in a manner not yet evident or explained. Similar doubts exist about the other races associated with the tau, although the question remains a little less clear cut; and surely only the most optimistic could believe that the humans in the tau empire are entirely free of taint, those afflicted undoubtedly being encouraged to use their curses in the name of the 'Greater Good'.*

*44. He seems to be drawing no distinction between the manufactoria themselves and the adjoining habs; which, to be fair, were so intermingled it was hard to tell where the dividing lines were in any case.*

*45. Terraforming efforts had begun in M35, with the establishment of an atmosphere, which rapidly became all but unbreathable as the business of plundering the world's resources had begun in earnest.*

*46. Pyria, noted for its extreme geological instability, on which Cain had encountered an eldar raiding party the year before.*

*47. Actually three or four times would have been a more accurate guess.*

*48. Though Fecundia's strategic value to the Imperium was predicated on its prodigious output of munitions, it produced a great many non-military commodities too; hardly a world in the sector was without ground vehicles produced there, and the chemical fertilisers made alongside the military explosives (often utilising the same reaction chambers) were all that made food production possible on three neighbouring agri-worlds of otherwise marginal fertility.*

*49. In fact, tau and human hearing appear to be in a broadly similar*

range, although the average tau seem deaf to the higher frequencies, while capable of distinguishing sounds most humans would perceive merely as uncomfortable vibration. Which probably accounts for their lamentable taste in music.

50. By this time their prospection fleet had, in fact, identified five other worlds in the sector suitable for exploitation, and begun preliminary work on two of them, estimating that they would become fully-functioning forge worlds by the end of the first century of M43. Of the other three, one was of equal interest to the tau, who had fortified it heavily against rival claims, the second was overrun by orks and not felt to be worth the trouble of cleansing, while the third lay directly in the path of Hive Fleet Kraken, and was therefore considered a poor long-term investment of resources.

51. Not the downward-sloping, ones, obviously.

52. A gesture common on several worlds in the sector, where the thumb is folded into the hand so that the fingers form a stylised aquila wing, meant to invoke good luck or ward off misfortune.

53. From which we can infer that Cain had at least taken the time to familiarise himself with the datafiles on the most senior members of the Adeptus Mechanicus on Fecundia.

54. Probably because, being out in the open, Cain was now the most visible target.

55. Such constructs are usually programmed to concentrate their fire on the greatest perceived threat; in this case the shuttle's multilaser, and the presence aboard it of a xenos interloper, compared to which Jurgen and his lasgun would simply be a minor irritation.

56. Typically, the high regard he was held in, admittedly in stark contrast to most of his colleagues, doesn't seem to have occurred to him.

57. Three and a thumb, for the pedantic among my readers.

58. Given their relatively slight stature it's no surprise that tau, on average, are somewhat weaker than humans, but, as in so many other respects, it's never wise to underestimate their resolve or tenacity in a crisis.

59. Or, more likely, felt that the risk of hitting Zyvan by accident was too great to try it.

60. Not a bad estimate, if the combat armour is also taken into

account.

61. *Most unlikely; if it had been that critically balanced it would have toppled from the vibrations induced by Cain and El'hassai's disembarkation.*

62. *As it most certainly should; a molecular bond effectively makes both components a part of the same object.*

63. *Typically, it doesn't seem to have occurred to Cain that Zyvan was prompted to listen by his personal regard for him, rather than the authority of his office.*

64. *Probably he was simply out of practice, after decades of communicating almost exclusively in binary.*

65. *A tradition still stubbornly maintained by a handful of tech-priests, who claim it predates the russet generally favoured by the priesthood of Mars. It seems likely that this unconventional attire is meant to display the wearer's position on one or other of the countless doctrinal disputes continually raging among the disciples of the Ommissiah, although what these may be is utterly opaque to outsiders, and unlikely to matter to anyone but the participants.*

66. *Like all forge worlds, Fecundia was continually surrounded by a swarm of freighters bringing in food and raw materials, and carrying away the products manufactured there. Zyvan may have been exaggerating the number of civilian vessels present, but not by much; shipping records for the time show an average of six hundred to eight hundred arrivals and departures a day, while many more would be in orbit transferring cargo at the same time.*

67. *Or Jurgen, knowing Cain.*

68. *Mostly from within the sector, although regiments from Brimlock, Elyssia and Valhalla were also present; including the 12th Field Artillery, the unit with which Cain had commenced his career, although if he found time to make a social call on his old comrades-in-arms he doesn't bother to mention it.*

69. *Consisting as it does mainly of reconstituted pulses, the consequences of relying on it as a staple become all too evident remarkably quickly, particularly in a confined space.*

70. *Since the Adepta Sororitas believe they take their orders from the Emperor Himself, by way of the Ecclesiarchy, they have little time for the instructions of any mere generals or Chapter Masters they may*

*find themselves fighting alongside. Or inquisitors, for that matter, although members of the Ordo Hereticus tend to make a little more headway with them than the others.*

*71. If Cain is a little vague about Naval ranks that's hardly surprising, given that he spent his entire career attached to the Imperial Guard, and would be far less familiar with their insignia and rank structure.*

*72. Almost certainly, as tech-priests conversing among themselves are unlikely to confine themselves to Gothic.*

*73. Most of them would have found the noise inspiring in fact, considering it the shuttle's hymn of praise to the Omnissiah.*

*74. Probably processing data, or interfacing directly with the on-board systems.*

*75. Which was, indeed, compelling.*

*76. Practically a requirement for service with the Ordo Malleus.*

*77. A near enough approximation, although the actual numbers might vary: combat servitors like the one Cain encountered on his initial arrival would sometimes be attached directly to the formation in place of a regular trooper, as would specialists with other useful skills.*

*78. Which implies that the landing skids had been mounted on wheels or gravitic repellers, probably somewhere out of Cain's line of sight.*

*79. Probably because the contaminated air which had entered along with the shuttle was quickly dissipated by the air currents from the recirculators.*

*80. After a certain level of augmentation, the difference is purely academic in any case.*

*81. Cyber-Altered Task unit, a mobile mechanism built to carry out simple tasks; like a basic servitor, although their lack of organic components makes them far less versatile, and incapable of being programmed for anything other than their original purpose.*

*82. A combat drug designed to enhance strength and aggression, most commonly used by the penal legions; the long-term effects on unaugmented physiologies are deleterious in the extreme, but this isn't considered a disadvantage where the troopers aren't expected to survive more than a battle or two anyway.*

*83. From which we can infer that, to Cain's eyes at least, the centurion appeared unarmed; an impression which may not have been*

*entirely accurate, as Mechanicus skitarii tend to have a number of implanted weapon systems designed to enhance their lethality at close quarters.*

*84. As a matter of fact Dysen was; his internal pict recordings show the action did indeed take place much as Cain describes it, although with rather more audible profanity.*

*85. The first time he mentions a change of level, although, given that the hangar was just below the roof, that's hardly a surprise.*

*86. While the others of that generation revert to purestrain genestealers, ready to continue spreading their taint.*

*87. Either by magnifying the images provided by his augmetic eyes, or by interfacing directly with the shuttle's telemetry in some fashion, probably.*

*88. A reasonable assumption, since he would have been able to exchange data with the skitarii directly.*

*89. A fanciful suggestion, but there is still much we don't fully understand about the nature of genestealer brood telepathy, so perhaps we shouldn't dismiss the notion completely out of hand. More likely, however, is that it was hanging back until the skitarii had been driven from the boarding ramp, and only noticed Cain and the others when Dysen attracted its attention.*

*90. In all probability the genestealer patriarch was using the power of the brood mind to launch a psychic attack, which Jurgen, being a blank, was able to nullify.*

*91. So either Cain was mistaken about him being unarmed before, or he'd picked up a fallen one during the melee.*

*92. Cain's superficial familiarity with Space Marine terminology appears to have been acquired during his secondment to the Reclaimers as their Imperial Guard liaison in 928: his experiences at the time have already been disseminated, and need not detain us any further at this point.*

*93. Which was hardly surprising: like most Adeptus Astartes Chapters, the Reclaimers numbered around a thousand warriors, operating in company or smaller sized units, often isolated from the others for decades, or even centuries, at a time.*

*94. Evidently the older Corvus-pattern, which the Reclaimers generally awarded to those showing particular bravery or initiative on*



*the battlefield.*

*95. Hardly a facility most tech-priests were likely to need, I'd have thought.*

*96. The Techmarine who crafted the fingers, and who subsequently became the closest thing to a friend Cain had among the Reclaimers.*

*97. Typically, it doesn't seem to have occurred to Cain that the good opinion Zyvan had of him almost certainly played a large part in his willingness to listen.*

*98. Having had the opportunity to interact over a prolonged period with members of the species, becoming a familiar enough presence to catch them in the occasional unguarded moment, I can confirm that they do indeed look just as gormless as the average human while lost in thought.*

*99. The tau word for humans, one of a handful of simple phrases Cain apparently picked up during his occasional contacts with members of the race which didn't involve physical violence.*

*100. No doubt a number of messenger drones had come aboard the Imperial flagship with him.*

*101. Ha!*

*102. Despite my best efforts, I have thus far been unable to determine the world on which this stood; or, equally likely, was burrowed into.*

*103. Actually a fair-sized suite, although, to be fair to Cain, he probably remained unaware of the existence of the rest of the rooms.*

*104. For a Death Korps trooper, dying in action is a given; although the majority do try to put it off as long as possible, to be of the greatest service to the Emperor in the interim.*

*105. Considerably more, if the defensive armament of the armada of merchant ships continually arriving and departing from the forge world is taken into account; although this would be so feeble against the might of a hive fleet Cain can be forgiven for apparently discounting it altogether.*

*106. In the apothecarion, recovering from his ordeal on Interitus Prime.*

*107. An informal Adeptus Astartes designation for a squad of about five Space Marines, typically a full-strength tactical squad split into two teams for mutual fire support. Nowhere in Cain's account does he give the actual number of Reclaimers on Fecundia, if he even knew,*

*but, given his familiarity with Space Marine nomenclature, it would be safe to assume about half a dozen, plus Sholer and the neophyte Techmarines referred to in passing.*

*108. No doubt the press gangs had been busily making up for any combat losses.*

*109. The first time Cain mentions the class of ship Zyvan had set up his command centre aboard. If he's being literal, rather than using 'battleship' as a colloquial term for an Imperial Navy vessel, it was probably the Retribution-class Throne Eternal, the only ship of its size involved in the defence of Fecundia.*

*110. Probably intended as a piece of self-deprecating humour, since, as previously noted, the relationship between the two men was far warmer than would normally be the case between a senior officer and the member of the Commissariat attached to his command; a happy knack Cain seems to have had throughout his career (cf his accounts of his service with the Valhallan 597th.)*

*111. Spaceborne interceptors and anti-ship attack boats respectively; both unlikely to be found aboard a Retribution-class battleship, so Zyvan's flagship may have been one of the many cruiser class vessels among the fleet rather than the Throne Eternal after all. A ship so equipped may also have carried a complement of Shark-class assault boats, but, since attempting to board a tyranid vessel would be the action of a madman, no attempt appears to have been made to deploy them if present.*

*112. Which implies that the vessel, whatever it was, had no dedicated fighter hangars, and that the docking bay being used to arm those Cain saw inside may well have been used only for utility craft in the normal course of events: which in turn means that the flagship may have been the Throne Eternal after all. I give up.*

*113. A clear figure of speech, as sound doesn't travel in a vacuum; something the producers of pict shows seem curiously unwilling to admit.*

*114. Probably the subspecies of vanguard drone classified by the Navy as 'stalkers,' although his description is sketchy enough to have applied to innumerable other variants; tyranids not being all that big on uniformity.*

*115. An odd choice of weapon for a spacecraft, where the recoil*

would have to be compensated for by bursts from the manoeuvring thrusters with every shot: for which reason lascannon are more common on Navy craft. Presumably this particular one was generally employed on ship to surface runs, making defence within an atmosphere a higher priority, or had been dispatched by the Adeptus Mechanicus as a courtesy to Cain.

116. A common configuration with Aquilae, although, given their numbers and ubiquity, nothing so straightforward as a standard design could truly be said to exist.

117. Possibly not as long as Cain appears to believe, his perception of time almost certainly having been distorted by the unpleasant and claustrophobic nature of his surroundings.

118. Probably quite literally, given the amount of mineral waste released into the environment over several millennia of energetic exploitation of the system's natural resources.

119. A reasonable assumption, since tyranid tactics tend to depend on overwhelming numbers. Typically, vanguard swarms are deployed in only a few locations, in an attempt to establish beachheads from which they can expand their depredations, while solitary scout organisms, most often lictors, are scattered more widely, in search of more potential targets for the following wave.

120. Each spore pod typically contains around twenty of the smaller organisms, although the number can be less, particularly in the case of larger creatures: lictors are generally deployed singly, for instance, as befits their role of solitary pathfinder, and carnifexes invariably so, given their bulk.

121. Probably not, in fact, as the gaunts Cain describes seem to be acting from instinct rather than direction; but with tyranids it's never safe to assume anything.

122. In so far as it was capable of thinking at all.

123. Cain's duelling instructor at the schola progenium.

124. Either Cain's standard of swordsmanship had improved considerably since his days as a progenii, or, as seems more likely, this was a rare case of a schola tutor unbending enough to share a joke with a particularly favoured pupil. As I've had occasion to remark elsewhere in my editing of his memoirs, Cain's academic record is undistinguished in most respects, apart from a precocious talent for

combat skills, in which he appears to have shown considerable aptitude.

125. Or not. The mycetic spore which delivered it to the surface could have been dispatched by any of the tyranid ships in orbit.

126. As so often with tyranid organisms, it's almost impossible to draw any general conclusions about such matters, as the characteristics of individual members of a subspecies can vary greatly from brood to brood. But since gaunts are primarily hunting predators, he was probably right to be cautious.

127. Chainswords vary as much as any other device common throughout the Imperium: the model Cain favoured was a military design, built for ruggedness rather than aesthetics, with a powercell capable of being recharged in the field in the same manner as those of a lasgun. In an emergency it could be replaced by a fresh unit, but doing so would be both time consuming and require specialised tools; hardly an option under the circumstances.

128. Cain may be misremembering here, as most cavalry in the Imperial Guard carry laspistols as sidearms, but it's also quite possible, given the harshness of conditions on the surface of Fecundia, and the difficulties of operating vehicles there which he's already alluded to, that this squadron were acting as dragoons rather than cavalry per se, and were accordingly equipped like an infantry squad.

129. A common piece of equipment among these mounted units, so, even if acting as mounted infantry on this occasion, this was almost certainly their usual role.

130. Prior to his secondment to Cain, Jurgen had served in an artillery regiment.

131. Usually the case; so as safe an assumption as possible where creatures as notoriously unpredictable as the tyranids are concerned.

132. Probably exaggeration for effect, although, having had my own slumbers disturbed by him through several intervening walls, I wouldn't swear to it.

133. Typically, Cain is vague both about the number of men in the unit to begin with, and how many were left; since they'd lost at least one casualty before their arrival (the vox-man Tyrie mentioned), but appear from the rest of his account to still be close to full strength, we can infer no more than two losses, perhaps three at a stretch.

134. *It's unclear here whether Tyrie had already told him this, or he's writing with hindsight.*

135. *A typical example of the Imperial Guard mania for three letter abbreviations (or TLAs, as Cain insisted on calling them), in this instance referring to Armoured Fighting Vehicles such as the ubiquitous Chimera and its bewildering array of variants, whose primary purpose is to transport troops in relative security on the battlefield while carrying sufficient heavy weaponry to provide effective fire support for them when they disembark.*

136. *A little less than a full Fecundian day, which lasted for twenty-six hours standard.*

137. *Possibly a reference to the Mantican Heresy, or the eldar invasion of Mythago, both campaigns in which Cain found himself on predominantly arboreal worlds.*

138. *A Valhallan colloquialism, meaning someone too naive and inexperienced to avoid frostbite; another of the many he acquired during his time with regiments from that world.*

139. *By this time the job was more or less completed, and a few were turning their attention from the Navy to the Imperial Guard, but the auspex arrays of command posts and air defence units were being accorded the highest priority.*

140. *Probably ejected by the crashing bio-ship too late to correct its attitude before entering the atmosphere, or even inside it.*

141. *Or Cain was more exhausted than he realised, which wouldn't be surprising under the circumstances.*

142. *Which implies that none of the Death Korps had personal vox-beads. Though widely used, they're far from ubiquitous among the Imperial Guard; the constant logistical challenge of keeping supplies flowing to the many areas of conflict around the Imperium often mean that there simply aren't enough available to equip every line trooper, or even the commanders of every unit, while some regiments deliberately restrict their use to officers as part of their doctrine. In either event, riders would be a low priority for such items, as most of the time their long-range scouting role would keep them out of range of the other units in their regiment in any case.*

143. *And horse.*

144. *Probably both.*

145. *Extremely unlikely, as no specimen has ever been recovered which showed the slightest sign of even the most rudimentary cognitive ability. More likely, Cain and Jurgen had simply incapacitated every appendage on or near the surface by this time.*

146. *Presumably a fragmentation warhead, spreading in flight, as normally a Land Speeder would only fire one missile at a time.*

147. *Possibly a subjective impression of its temperature, given his earlier remarks about the effects of spending so long in the saddle.*

148. *Drawn, like those of many others, from aspirants to initiation who failed the rigorous selection criteria, but were nevertheless judged worthy to serve in a support capacity.*

149. *Hardly surprising, as these are generally held in reserve until the later stages of a tyrannid invasion, when the hive mind has pinpointed fixed defences which need to be circumvented.*

150. *Mobile reclamation platforms, which sift the sand for trace minerals left by earlier generations of environmental pollution, or too scarce to have been worth the effort of mining conventionally in previous millennia.*

151. *Hardly surprising, given the ordeal he'd just been through.*

152. *Between two and three hundred, depending on the type of harvester, area of operation, and the expected yield of usable minerals.*

153. *Which indicates that, by this time, he'd discarded the breather, although the point at which he did so isn't clear.*

154. *And hardly surprising, given their visible weapons.*

155. *Presumably because its pilot had some difficulty travelling as slowly as the lumbering harvester.*

156. *Quite literally.*

157. *It's not entirely clear whether, as before, Yail had discarded his Terminator suit in favour of the lighter tactical armour by this point, but it seems likely.*

158. *The first direct mention of the Naval officer in overall charge of the fleet, Admiral Boume, a much decorated and highly regarded commander. He would have been copied in on the intelligence reports Cain was preparing for Lord General Zyvan, but he and Cain don't appear ever to have met face to face; quite naturally, as Cain was attached to the Imperial Guard throughout his service, and the Navy has its own commissars assigned to oversee it.*

159. Almost certainly a bit of dramatic licence on Cain's part, as a tech-priest of her age and seniority would be a little better practised at concealing her emotions than this.

160. Possible, though implausible; more likely, his imagination was filling in the gap, in response to Kildhar's implication that more sophisticated monitoring equipment had been surgically implanted in the older group.

161. A view with many adherents among the Ordo Xenos, although far from universally accepted. Some even argue that if the tyranids were ever to succeed in devouring all other life in the galaxy, the hive fleets would fall just as readily on one another, until the ultimate survivor succeeded in absorbing all the available biomass into itself.

162. Precisely how has still to be determined, despite the best efforts of hundreds of the magos biologis currently working for the Ordo Xenos; but then we still have only the most rudimentary understanding of how the hive mind perceives anything around it.

163. Not to mention billions of other tech-priests scattered around the galaxy.

164. Except, perhaps, over their helmet voxes.

165. Presumably the same thought had occurred to the Space Marines. Using weapons as destructive as bolters surrounded by so much vital and delicate equipment would have been an act of desperation.

166. Cain appears with this weapon, or one very like it, in many of the propaganda prints bearing his likeness, although to the best of my knowledge he never used it in the field, preferring the laspistol he was used to. He eventually presented it to me, and it continues to serve the Emperor well as part of the armoury available to my entourage.

167. An Imperial Guard euphemism for mercy killing.

168. It's unclear here whether he means the actual local representative of the Adeptus Arbites, or the Fecundian law enforcers they would be overseeing. Probably both.

169. The enhanced immune systems of Space Marines are indeed remarkable, but not that good.

170. Which on Fecundia were hardly to be taken lightly.

171. From the fact that he doesn't mention the skitarii, we can infer that none were within earshot.

172. Probably to hide an emotional reaction, although, typically, this appears not to have occurred to Cain.

173. Quite possibly, if their augmetics were powered by internal capacitors; a common arrangement among heavily modified tech-priests, particularly if they do a lot of work in the vicinity of poorly insulated wiring.

174. Either for subsequent analysis or to contain a potential biohazard, if not both.

175. Jurgen's ability to nullify psychic phenomena appeared to have disrupted genestealer brood telepathy, and the ability of individual tyrannids to sense the greater hive mind, on several occasions prior to this, although, for obvious reasons, experimental verification was never possible.

176. Got that right. Jurgen was one of my most carefully-guarded assets, which is why I'd left him in the relative obscurity of his position with Cain, to be used as required, instead of inducting him directly into my entourage. Apart from the inconvenience of my own psyker collapsing every time he walked into the room, I had no wish to be constantly fending off colleagues from the Ordo Malleus who felt a blank would be better employed tagging along on their latest daemon-hunting expedition.

177. A reference to his origins in an underhive, although on which world remains obscure, 'scavvies' being a common term in such communities for those at both the literal and metaphorical lowest stratum of society, who subsist by scavenging whatever they can from the detritus falling (or being dumped) from above.

178. Despite the horrific nature of the wounds they inflict, fleshborer beetles die within seconds, so those injured by them often recover if enough remains of any vital organs attacked, and tech-priests would have had most of those replaced by more robust augmetics in any case.

179. Presumably a particularly heavily augmented individual.

180. Clearly an exaggeration, as he'd already been exposed to it for some time on more than one occasion.

181. If the bio-ship fragment was really, as Cain described, the size of a Baneblade, the door would have had to have been considerably larger than that to admit it.

182. Apart from the Techmarines that Sholer mentioned at their first



*meeting, who appear to have been elsewhere throughout the incident.*

*183. Or simply not caring; under the circumstances, he was almost bound to hit something.*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# OLD SOLDIERS NEVER DIE

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



### *Editorial Note:*

*Of all the desperate situations faced by Cain, when he had no alternative but to do so, the defence of Lentonia in 938.M41 must surely be counted one of the strangest. Partly due to the nature of the foe, and partly due to the circumstances under which he found himself caught up in the events there.*

*Editing this portion of his memoirs has been an equally atypical undertaking, since, for much of the events he describes, he was accompanied by an unusually reliable eyewitness, whose account I have used to supplement his own observations. I have also, in the interests of presenting as rounded a picture as possible, reluctantly incorporated a little additional material from the memoirs of Jenit Sulla, which present as formidable a challenge to the patience of the reader as those I've been forced to use hitherto, and for which I feel obliged to apologise in advance.*

*As ever, I have left Cain's original account of events as close to how I found it as possible, keeping my own interpolations to a minimum, except for those I felt necessary to elucidate an obscure reference or otherwise clarify a potential ambiguity. Although, where Cain was concerned, ambiguity was often the most consistent thing about him.*

*Amberley Vail, Ordo Xenos*



## ONE

Given the number of times what was supposed to be a straightforward deployment turned out to be anything but, dropping me and the unit I was accompanying smack into the middle of a desperate struggle to survive, the knowledge that we'd arrived in the Lenton system long after the war there had been brought to a victorious conclusion was a welcome change of pace. It wouldn't have done to let my natural inclination to do handsprings and shout 'Huzzah!' show visibly, however, as I was popularly supposed to be the kind of idiot who'd relish the chance to put himself in harm's way in the name of the Golden Throne, so I settled on a vaguely rueful air, as though disappointed at our good fortune. Not that I was exactly relishing the prospect of the next few weeks, which promised little beyond unrelieved tedium and finger food, but compared to the kind of excitement I was used to, I'd take boredom over bowel-clenching terror every time.

Especially as I'd only just made it up the boarding ramp of the last ship out at embarkation, the swarm of tyranids on our tail almost filling the horizon.

'I'm sure there are still a few pockets of resistance to mop up,' I said, privately resolving to discover where they were and make sure I avoided them.

'Of course,' Colonel Kasteen said, running a finger around the collar of her dress uniform in the manner of someone suppressing the desire to unfasten it. Like most ice-worlders, she preferred shirtsleeves for the most part, reserving the heavy greatcoats generally associated with Valhallan regiments for environments they were fitted to, and had chosen summer kit

for the occasion; although the weather in the planetary capital seemed distinctly autumnal if you asked me. Dark grey clouds were scudding across a light grey sky mottled with flecks of blue, and the scent of recent rain had been the first thing to greet my nostrils as the boarding ramp of our shuttle extruded itself to lick the still-damp rockcrete of the pad, as if tentatively quenching its thirst.

In the distance, across the wide expanse of the landing field, columns of steam marked the points where the rest of our heavy shuttles had grounded; the commandeered freighter we'd arrived on didn't have nearly enough of its own to disembark an entire regiment, of course, but by this time the local traffic controllers had acquired sufficient experience of offloading large bodies of troops and their equipment to divert a veritable swarm of them to pick us up almost as soon as we'd reached orbit, and I'd made sure I was among the first wave to hit the ground. Something I always tried to do when the likelihood of meeting significant resistance was low, as it consolidated my undeserved reputation for leading from the front, and gave me a head start in finding the most comfortable quarters wherever we were due to be billeted. 'I imagine the regiments already here will be happy to catch their breath while we dot the "i"s and cross the "t"s. Who are they, anyway?'

'Vostroyans, mostly,' I said, glancing at the data-slate my aide had just handed to me. Jurgen had tidied himself up too, insofar as that was possible, centring his helmet on his head<sup>1</sup>, and brushing most of the accumulated detritus from the ragged clumps of facial hair which more or less assembled themselves into a scurf-flecked beard. Despite these heroic efforts he seemed to have stopped some way short of actual ablutions, however, and I found myself falling into my usual habit of edging upwind of him as I spoke. 'Three line regiments and an armour group. Plus the Tallarn 236th, who got here a couple of weeks ahead of the others, after being diverted on their way back to Coronus for reassignment. And a Valhallan unit for fire support.' I don't mind admitting my voice took on a tinge of surprise at this point. 'The 12th Field Artillery.' The regiment I'd begun my long and inglorious career with, some twenty years before.

'Haven't seen them since Gravalax,' Kasteen said, although whether she was pleased at the prospect of renewing the acquaintance or not was hard to tell, since she was fighting off another attempt at strangulation by her shirt collar at the time.

'We've all come a long way since then,' I said, and the colonel nodded

thoughtfully.

‘Thanks to you,’ she replied. ‘If you hadn’t joined us when you did, we wouldn’t have lasted another week, never mind seven years up at the sharp end<sup>2</sup>.’

‘Any other commissar would have done the same,’ I said, feeling unaccountably embarrassed for a moment, although I suppose many of my colleagues would have gone about the job in a rather more brutally straightforward manner. (And probably ended up on the wrong end of a friendly fire accident too, which is what tends to happen when you incur the displeasure of a large number of people with guns.) Kasteen looked as though she was about to take issue with that, but before she got the chance, Jurgen broke into the conversation with a phlegm-laden attempt at a tactful cough.

‘I think that’s your escort, sir.’ He sounded vaguely affronted at the notion, as if it somehow cast doubt on his own ability to ensure our safety, although, since the wretched planet was supposed to be pacified by this point, the matter was purely one of protocol in any case.

‘I think you’re right,’ I agreed, as the small knot of vehicles drew closer. A ground car, too large, black and shiny to be military issue, was flanked by a couple of outriders on motorcycles, the pennons flying from poles affixed to the riders’ backs echoing the design of the smaller ones fluttering around the limousine. I didn’t recognise the heraldry, but it seemed to involve a great deal of gold thread, entangling an Imperial aquila like vines clambering up a wall. ‘Look more like Arbites<sup>3</sup> than soldiers.’

‘Governor’s household troops, sir,’ Jurgen said, consulting the uniform guide in his data-slate, something I suppose I should have done myself before now; but in all fairness, I was familiar enough with those of the other Guard regiments among our task force, and the Lentonian militia were all either dead or confined to barracks, pending the purge of any who might have supported the wrong side in the recent insurrection. Anyone else in a uniform or carrying a gun would be fair game, or best avoided, depending on our relative numbers and firepower.

‘I thought they’d shot him,’ I said.

‘That was the old one,’ Kasteen said, a note of doubt entering her voice. Usually we had Major Broklaw to fill us in on these niggling little details, which he dutifully filleted from the brain-numbing morass of the Munitorum briefing materials, so the colonel and I didn’t have to wade

through them ourselves. But Broklaw was still in orbit, waiting for the last shuttle down, to ensure our deployment went as smoothly as these things ever did<sup>4</sup>. ‘I heard they found a nephew or something to take over.’

‘Good for them,’ I said, hoping he’d make a better fist of it than the last incumbent, who’d managed to rouse a placid and Emperor-fearing population to armed rebellion with almost indecent haste following his appointment. Truth to tell, I was still somewhat vague about the exact nature of their grievances, but if the erstwhile governor ran true to form it probably had something to do with treating the tithing revenues as his personal cash box, and taking an excessive interest in other people’s wives, husbands, or farm animals<sup>5</sup>. All in all, Lentonian was probably better off without him; but letting the plebs get away with taking decisions like that for themselves would only lead to worse trouble later on, so, as usual, the Guard had been called in to restore order, and visit retribution on whoever it seemed most expedient to blame. And, of course, the local Chaos cults had all crawled out of the woodwork to join in the fun, although, if anything, they’d probably helped in the long run, providing a handy foe the Lentonians could feel good about uniting against, whatever their own differences.

While we’d been mulling matters over, the car and its escort had pulled up at the foot of the boarding ramp, and the three of us walked down to meet it. The outriders saluted with simultaneous precision, the polarised visors of their helmets melding almost seamlessly with the glossy black body armour which encased them, and I found myself suppressing a sudden flare of unease as I returned the gesture with my best parade ground snap: it was like acknowledging a couple of chunks of animate shadow. The slighter of the two – whose build led me to suspect the presence of a woman inside the protective carapace, although without sight of the face behind the blank reflective plate it was hard to be sure – dismounted, revealing a holstered hellpistol at her waist, no doubt meant to supplement the carbine stowed just forward of the saddle and whatever lethal surprises had been installed on the bike itself. She (for the sake of argument) took a step towards the car, reaching out a hand, but before she could open the passenger door for us it popped from the inside, shoved hard by a young man with a shock of blond hair and a wide, welcoming grin.

‘It’s all right, Klarys, I’ve got it,’ he said, sliding across the wide seat to make room for us. The anonymous trooper turned away, her body language

making her affront at the breach of protocol perfectly plain in spite of her concealed visage; sentiments I was certain Jurgen shared. The young man stuck out a hand to shake. 'Jonas Worden, Planetary Governor. Call me Jona. I've had a lifetime's worth of "Your excellency" gash in the last few weeks.'

Kasteen and I took in his worn groxhide jacket and utility cloth trousers, and looked at one another dubiously. He didn't look like any of the Emperor's anointed I'd ever met.

'Ciaphas Cain,' I said, concealing my bewilderment with the ease of a lifetime of practice, and taking the proffered hand, making sure not to exert the full strength of my augmetic fingers. 'No nickname, I'm afraid. But in my profession you tend not to make friends.'

'Really?' The young man looked faintly surprised, then grinned, as if realising I was pulling his leg. 'There's a Valhallan officer calls you Cai. Sounds like a nickname to me.'

'That would be Toren,' I said, before glancing back at Kasteen, who was being helped onto the overstuffed bench seat by the same proffered hand. 'You remember Major Divas?' No one else I could think of ever used the familiar form of my given name, which was just as well, as I detested it; something Divas never quite managed to grasp, in spite of innumerable hints over the years.

'Of course,' Kasteen said, while I settled into the seat opposite her and the young man, and wondered which of the polished wooden cabinets mounted on the walls concealed a decanter. 'A fine officer.' She grinned at me, clearly enjoying my discomfiture.

'You don't look much like a governor,' I said, deciding to play the bluff man of action card. That usually went down well with civilians who thought they knew what sort of man I was, and I intended to use the technique a lot in the next few weeks; I still wasn't exactly overjoyed about being dragged into a political junket, and was damned if I was going to be any more gracious about it than I had to be.

'I don't feel like one either,' Jona said, with disarming candour, and I found myself in some danger of liking him. 'I used to glean news for the *Light of Truth*<sup>6</sup>, till some dungwit dragged me off to the palace.'

'It can't have been that much of a surprise,' I said. 'If you were next in line...'

Jona laughed. 'Nowhere near it. My mother turned her back on the whole



festering lot of 'em thirty years ago. Wouldn't have been here if she hadn't.'

'I see,' I said, although I didn't, quite. 'There was still some bad feeling among the rest of the family, I take it.'

'There surely is now.' He grinned. 'Why do you think the Martial Law Council stuck me with the job?'

'At a guess, because you're the only member of the family who didn't want it,' I said, and he nodded.

'They were fighting over the throne like rats in a sack. I did some good pieces on it.' He started to pull out a battered data-slate, then thought better of it, no doubt correctly divining that they wouldn't mean much to us anyway. 'Power-broking, character assassination – a couple didn't stop at character either. Sold a lot of sheets.' Then he sighed, the animation which had come over him slipping away again, and waved a disgusted-looking hand at our luxurious surroundings. 'Now this. Your council's got a poor sense of humour.'

But a strong grasp of the practical, I thought. In my experience, the only people it's safe to have in a position of power are the ones who don't want to be there in the first place. Before I could say anything to that effect, however, my aide's shadow filled the doorway, and his bouquet flowed out ahead of him to fill the car. Jona recoiled.

'Jurgen,' I said diplomatically, 'would you mind following us in the Salamander? I'm sure his ex– our host has enough to do without seeing us to our quarters when the meeting's over.'

'It's no trouble,' the young man said, in the reflexively polite way of someone who knows you know they don't mean it, still too stunned at Jurgen's appearance to take umbrage at my near use of the term he detested. As the door slammed, following Jurgen's 'Very good, sir,' and something resembling a salute, he shook himself as though rousing from a stupor. 'What was that?'

'My aide,' I said, feeling no further explanation to be warranted. 'Shouldn't we be going?'

'I suppose so,' Jona agreed. 'Don't you want to wait for him to unload your transport?'

'He'll catch up,' Kasteen assured him, knowing Jurgen's robust attitude to anything with an engine, and clearly wondering how best to avoid the journey home.

'If you're sure.' The governor touched a vox control. 'Back to the gas

factory, Fossil.’ He must have caught the questioning look between Kasteen and myself, because he added ‘the Concilium<sup>7</sup>’ for our benefit. The chauffeur, invisible behind a panel of one-way armourglass, rolled us smoothly into motion.

Comfortable as the ride was, especially compared to being driven by Jurgen, and in spite of our host’s attempts to while away the journey with polite conversation about my upcoming itinerary, I found it impossible to relax and enjoy our luxurious surroundings. Aside from the young man’s manifest eccentricity, meeting Imperial Guard officers from the starport in person hardly being the kind of thing planetary governors usually did, I was uncomfortably aware that his previous profession made him a shrewd judge of people, and more likely than most to see through the facade I generally presented to the galaxy. In addition to which, I’d been in enough vehicles like this to be well aware of what a tempting target they made. There were still malcontents on the loose, by Jona’s own admission, and even if they had no idea of who was inside the big shiny car, it was clearly someone of wealth and influence. Protecting it with no more than a pair of outriders was tantamount to towing a sign saying ‘Assassinate Me!’ so far as I could see; in fact I’d been the target of just such an attempt myself on Pererimunda, although, to be fair, on that occasion I’d been the unfortunate victim of a case of mistaken identity<sup>8</sup>.

Accordingly, I paid a fair amount of attention to our surroundings as we left the bleak expanse of the starport and began to make our way into the city proper. Like many predominantly urban worlds, the main conurbation was contiguous with the boundary of the landing field, the outer hab-blocks protected from the consequences of a crash or explosion by a thick, high, blast wall, through which we trundled in a short, squat tunnel. Not unnaturally this made a formidable fortification, which the rebels had attempted to hold against the arriving Imperial forces, resulting in a fair amount of damage, particularly once my old comrades from the 12th Field Artillery unlimbered their Earthshakers and got stuck in.

Deep craters in the inner walls, and a few crumbled ramparts, clearly marked the positions where the main fortifications had been. Shells being shells, the hab-blocks around the perimeter had taken quite a battering too, and on first re-emerging into daylight we found ourselves traversing a bleak hinterland of tumbled walls and scattered rubble, through which the hastily patched roadway slashed like a gutting knife. At first I thought it deserted,

but before long occasional glimpses of a stretched tarp or the smoke from a cooking fire betrayed the presence of inhabitants, eking out what existence they could among the ruins.

‘Outliers,’ Jona said, seeing the direction of my gaze. ‘Not much trouble, unless they get caught up in a food riot. Most of ’em just want to be left alone.’

‘Most of them?’ I asked, my paranoia going into overdrive, and the governor shrugged. ‘There’s a few rock lobbers among ’em, and gangers squabbling over territory. But they’ll keep till the local militia are reactivated.’

‘Glad to hear it,’ I said, somewhat relieved, but still keeping my hands near my weapons. I was beginning to see movement between the shattered walls, more and more frequently, and wondered if waiting for the rest of the regiment might not have been a better idea.

‘Why are we slowing?’ Kasteen asked, unfastening the flap of her holster, and I hastened to follow her lead; we’d both spent most of our lives in warzones, and knew from bitter experience that even the most subtle intimations of trouble should never be ignored.

Jona looked bewildered, and about as nervous as most civilians do when their guests unexpectedly draw sidearms in a confined space. My chainsword I left scabbarded for the nonce, as it would be more of a danger to ourselves in our suddenly claustrophobic surroundings than to a putative attacker. ‘No idea,’ he said, and activated the vox. ‘Fossil?’

‘The road’s blocked,’ the chauffeur informed us, sounding irritated rather than concerned. ‘Some kind of crowd up ahead.’

‘Armed?’ I asked.

‘Nothing obvious,’ a feminine voice cut in, Klarys I presumed. ‘They’re just milling around. Trading food, probably. Moving up to clear them.’

‘Can we see from in here?’ Kasteen asked, a moment before I could pose the question myself, and the governor poked a control stud. With a squeal of gears the partition retracted, revealing our driver, dressed in the same body armour as the outriders, but without a helmet. Beyond him, the road was now visible, blocked by twenty or thirty ragged-looking civilians. It was hard to make much out, as the shadows were plentiful and deep, but they were an unhealthy-looking bunch, their skin sallow, their movements slow and uncoordinated. All of a sudden, I found myself grateful for the armoured bodywork surrounding us, for I had no doubt that it would be

proof against any weapons this curiously passive mob might bring to bear.

Not a single one reacted as the motorcyclists bore down on their position, beyond slowly turning heads to track their movement: the outriders drew to a halt a few metres away, their engines revving, and ordered them to disperse. Still no reaction, and I found my palms tingling, a warning from my subconscious I'd learned to take seriously over the years.

'Pull back,' I cautioned, hoping the vox would relay my words, but if they did it was too late; the whole crowd suddenly began to move, like a single viscid pool of degenerate humanity, surging forwards to engulf the riders before either could react. Both troopers tried to gun their engines and pull away, but hadn't room to turn the heavy bikes. As we watched, helpless and horrified, they were pulled from their mounts and overwhelmed by sheer force of numbers, disappearing into the depths of the mob as thoroughly as if they'd been absorbed by a tyranid swarm.

'What he said,' Jona snapped, knowing trouble when he saw it, which was hardly surprising given his former occupation. Unfortunately the chauffeur had kept us moving slowly forwards, confident in his comrades' ability to clear the way, and by the time he slammed the gears into reverse, with a grinding sound even Jurgen might have winced at, the tide of bodies was already lapping around our fragile refuge. The car bumped, running over several yielding obstacles, before suddenly fetching up against an immovable one with a groan of stressed metal. Unable to see, our driver had mounted the pavement and rammed one of the larger pieces of rubble.

'How solid is this thing?' I asked, flicking the safety off my laspistol, while Kasteen chambered a round into her bolt pistol, and began an urgent conversation about reinforcements over her vox-bead. Reinforcements we both knew were unlikely to arrive in time.

'Solid enough,' Jona said, although I doubted that; the colonel's bolt pistol could definitely punch a hole through the armourglass window, although doing so from this side would undoubtedly deafen us, not to mention fill the passenger compartment with razor-edged shards. Our attackers didn't seem to be carrying any armour-piercing small arms, however, so getting in would take them a little more time than that.

Or not. Blank-eyed, heedless of the damage they were doing to themselves, they kept battering relentlessly at the bodywork, clawing at the metal and armourglass in their single-minded determination to get in. The window nearest my head crazed where one of the rioters butted it

repeatedly, flecks of blood and brain tissue marring the transparent surface.

Most disturbing of all was the silence. Throughout their frenzied onslaught, not one of them spoke, although given their behaviour that was hardly surprising; I'd seen things in Jurgen's hair that showed more signs of intelligence. Even the sounds of their movement were inaudible, muffled by the thick armour enclosing us.

'They're insane!' Kasteen said, more of a dispassionate tactical assessment than an expression of alarm, despite her vehemence.

'Or on combat drugs,' I agreed, although where they might have got them from was beyond me. I turned to the governor, who was looking pale, and hyperventilating: a bad sign, as, offhand, I could hardly think of worse circumstances in which to be stuck in a confined space with a panicking civilian. 'Any of the local gangers use 'slaught, 'zerk, stuff like that?'

'No, I don't think so.'

As I'd hoped, answering the simple, direct question brought him back a little, and I pressed my advantage.

'You're a gleaner, right? Anything unusual, you'd know.'

He shook his head, though whether in negation or to clear it would be anybody's guess. 'The last year or so there've been nothing but wild stories,' he told me. 'The insurrection, then the heretics – there were even supposed to be psykers among 'em, but nobody actually saw any.' The whole car lurched, a development I didn't like the feel of in the least.

'They're climbing onto the roof,' Kasteen said, clearly wondering whether to try putting a bolt through it to discourage them, before deciding against the experiment, much to my relief. The top armour would be the weakest, to save weight, but it might still be strong enough to direct the full force of the explosive charge back towards us. The floor, on the other hand, had been heavily reinforced against mines, lowering the car's centre of gravity, and thank the Throne for that: they'd probably have had us over by now if it wasn't.

Sure enough, the battering sound above us grew louder, and the ceiling began to develop some ominous dents. Isolated from us in his armoureglass box, the chauffeur produced a combat shotgun from under his seat, and racked it with an ominous *clack*, clearly anticipating the end in a matter of moments.

I was just on the point of commending my spirit to the Emperor, and hoping He hadn't been paying too much attention to my activities of late,

when the world around us erupted in a flickering orange glare. Searing flames lapped around the immobilised car, our attackers crisping and withering, losing their grips on the bodywork along with their musculature. Naked bones appeared through the sizzling flesh, skulls leering at us for a moment before falling away; then the firestorm ceased as abruptly as it had begun.

‘Are you all right, sir?’ Jurgen asked, his familiar and welcome voice suddenly filling my vox-bead, as he brought the hurtling Salamander to a shuddering halt amid a blizzard of shredded roadbed from beneath the locked tracks. He waved a cheerful greeting over the jagged lip of metal where a carnifex had ripped the top of the driver’s compartment clean away in its eagerness to get at him during our desperate flight to safety. Unsurprisingly, it seemed, the regimental engineers were still concentrating their efforts on getting the Chimeras back into shape, my personal transport having to wait its turn in the name of operational efficiency.

‘Fine.’ I kicked the car door open, and piled out instantly, drawing my chainsword as I went; there were still scattered pools of blazing promethium from the heavy flamer burst in our immediate vicinity, not to mention a fair number of combusting corpses, and if our fuel tank had been ruptured the whole thing could go up at any moment. Nothing attacked me, although if any of our assailants still lived and were making a run for it I couldn’t tell, the thick pall of foul-smelling smoke from their fellows’ immolation concealing most of our surroundings from view.

Now that it seemed I’d escaped sharing their fate I had an image to maintain, so I glanced back at Kasteen, Jona and the open-mouthed chauffeur, with an appropriately heroic flourish of my weapons, and beckoned to them. ‘All clear,’ I said, rather spoiling the gesture with a cough, as I got a lungful of greasy smoke.

‘Lucky the armour held,’ Kasteen said, with a rather tight nod in Jurgen’s direction.

‘Thought it would,’ my aide agreed phlegmatically. ‘But it wouldn’t have if I’d used the heavy bolter to scrape ’em off.’

‘I suppose not,’ I agreed, unable to fault his logic, and, scabbarding the chainsword again, I turned to the governor. ‘It seems it’s my turn to offer you a lift.’

‘I appreciate it,’ the young man assured me, scrambling into the rear

passenger compartment of the Salamander, while his chauffeur stood guard with the shotgun, glancing left and right in barely suppressed panic.

‘Best check out the riders,’ Kasteen said, leading the way towards the wreckage of the motorbikes.

Conscious of our audience I began to follow her, despite the almost overwhelming impulse to clamber aboard the scout vehicle and get as far away from this blighted wasteland as possible. As I approached the nearest body, Jurgen joined me, his lasgun held ready for use, and his distinctive odour fighting to be noticed over the stench from the crackling cadavers.

‘Messy,’ he commented, looking down, and I nodded. The larger of the two outriders had been partially protected from the fury of the mob by his body armour, but clearly not thoroughly enough. His head was lolling at an angle only possible with a broken neck, while several plates of his external carapace had been ripped clean away, exposing the flesh beneath; and the condition of that had already been accurately summarised by my aide.

After some of the sights I’ve seen, it takes a lot to turn my stomach, but those raking, bone-exposing wounds did the trick all right, not least because I had no doubt that I’d have suffered a similar fate if my aide hadn’t intervened in so timely a fashion. ‘Are those bite marks?’ I asked, incredulous, although the answer to that was obvious after even the most cursory inspection, the manner in which the flesh was torn all too distinctive.

Jurgen nodded. ‘Looks like,’ he agreed, as incapable as ever of recognising a rhetorical question.

‘This one’s alive!’ Kasteen called, forestalling any further comment I might have made, and we hurried over to join her. Klarys had fared a little better, evidently having had time to draw her hellpistol and get off a shot or two before being borne to the ground, although she was unconscious, and her visible wounds were hardly less severe than those of her deceased colleague.

‘Not for long,’ I said, while Jurgen produced a medi-pack from the collection of pouches and webbing he was habitually festooned with and began patching up the worst of the leaks, ‘unless we get her to a medicae.’

Kasteen nodded, her face set. ‘We will,’ she said grimly. ‘Then I’m sending in a couple of platoons to clear the ruins.’ She shook her head, still unwilling to believe the evidence of her own eyes. ‘Cannibals in the heart of an Imperial capital. It’s intolerable.’

‘Desperation can drive people to almost anything,’ I said, although if the tingling in my palms was anything to go by, there was something a lot deeper and darker at the heart of Lentonía than that. Just how dark, though, I had still to discover.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)





## TWO

What with one thing and another, our official reception at the Concilium was rather late in starting. Like most local seats of government, the huge building was vulgarly over-ornamented on the outside, so the local plebeians would be left in no doubt of the exalted state of their rulers and betters, and even more so on the inside, to produce an appropriate sense of awe among those venturing within to petition the Administratum functionaries who thronged the place, or pay their tithes. The effect on Kasteen and I was rather the opposite, however, since we'd seen it all before, and tended to notice things like the way the gilt was tarnishing on the death masks of deceased local luminaries (Jona's immediate predecessor being a notable absentee), and the inordinate number of fraying threads in the fading tapestries of long-forgotten triumphs. If Jurgen had an opinion he kept it to himself, merely parting the throng of babbling pict-recorders and printscribes between us and the door with grim determination, the butt of his lasgun, and a bow wave of halitosis.

Over a hundred heads turned in our direction as we entered the wide, high reception room, which, to my complete lack of surprise, resembled nothing so much as a gambling den with pretensions to an air of sophistication. Spotting a refreshment table, I made my way towards it as best I could through the scrum, most of the components of which seemed to want a word or a handshake; reminding myself that this was what I was here for, and clearing the way with my chainsword was probably a bad idea, I smiled and nodded like an automaton, pretending to remember names and faces,

none of which made an impression strong enough to last a second beyond the breaking of eye contact. When I finally made it to the viands, I found I might as well not have bothered: it seemed Jona hadn't been exaggerating about the extent of the food shortages he'd mentioned in the course of our journey here. If the top of the social heap were making do with such basic fare, Throne alone knew what the commoners were eating, apart from each other. All of a sudden, the evidence of cannibalism I'd stumbled across seemed a lot less surprising, although the thought of it still stirred my stomach.

The meagre table had one compensation for the effort required to reach it, however: a steaming samovar stood at one end, exuding the welcome odour of tanna and a faint hiss of steam, no doubt intended to make the Valhallan contingent feel at home. Following my nose through the obstacle course of scarlet Vostroyan uniforms, admixed with flowing Tallarn robes, and the rather more ornate garments favoured by local officials and nobles, I pitched up at the urn, while the governor did his best to make himself heard over the babble of conversation.

'Sorry we're late,' he said, his voice shaking a little. He still looked a bit green around the gills to me, although whether this was the result of delayed shock, or his first exposure to Jurgen's driving, I couldn't be sure. 'We were attacked.' He went on for some while after that, giving the impression that I'd leapt out of the car to face the mob, and seen them off single-handed, while I turned my attention to the tanna.

'Cai!' a familiar voice called. A hand fell on my arm, and I turned, selecting an appropriate expression of pleased surprise.

'Toren.' Sure enough it was Divas, a tanna bowl of his own in hand, grinning at me in the puppyish manner I remembered so well. 'I was wondering if you'd be here.' Rather to my own surprise, I found I wasn't having to work nearly as hard at looking pleased as I'd expected. The intervening years had evidently been kind to him: the streaks of grey around his temples hadn't spread very far, and the lines on his face were still faint enough to be barely noticeable.

'I knew you'd be joining us eventually.' He grinned. 'Once you got bored with charging off to chase heretics, as usual.' Which was one of the reasons I tolerated his company; despite being better placed than most to see past the facade I took such pains to present to the galaxy, he believed implicitly in my heroic public persona. Perhaps because he chafed at the lack of

opportunity afforded him to engage the enemy directly in an artillery regiment, which generally potted at them from a safe distance of several kilometres<sup>9</sup>, and being even tangentially associated with my exploits allowed him a little vicarious excitement.

‘Little enough, compared to what you and the other regiments have been through,’ I said. So far as I could see, the senior officers of all the Imperial Guard regiments on the planet were assembled in the room, along with their commissars, the high command of the local militia, and the usual random assortment of local notables. Most of them looked haggard and gaunt, on the brink of exhaustion, which was hardly surprising; the fighting had been concentrated around Viasalix, since whoever controlled the capital effectively controlled the world, and city fighting against an enemy who knows the terrain is a grim, attritional business. I had no doubt they’d be heartily glad to hand the mopping up over to the 597th, and take the chance of a bit of downtime before moving on to their next war. Kasteen was conversing with Colonel Mostrue, the CO of the 12th Field Artillery, who didn’t seem to have changed a bit; seeing me glance in their direction he nodded a curt greeting, before resuming what looked like an urgent discussion with her, no doubt filling her in on all the stuff that had been left out of our briefing slate.

‘We’ve taken a battering, all right,’ Divas admitted soberly. ‘A couple of the Vostroyan regiments are almost down to half strength, and the Twelfth is pretty stretched as well. Nothing like as bad as that yet, of course, but still...’ He shrugged.

‘Has the fighting really been that fierce?’ I asked, trying to remember how much combat damage we’d passed coming in. A fair bit, of course, but all around obvious strategic targets, and no sign of the widespread collateral devastation I’d have expected to see if the Guard had taken anything like that much of a battering.

Divas shook his head. ‘Some kind of local lurgi,’ he said. ‘It hit the militia first, then started running through the Guard.’ He looked as though he was about to say more, but before he could, Jona drew everyone’s attention back to me, with a wave of his hand.

‘Anyway, we got here,’ he concluded, his breath and colour restored by a large mug of recaff and a sticky-looking pastry, the last traces of which he licked from his fingers before continuing. ‘Thanks to Commissar Cain,’ at which point every face in the room turned in my direction.

‘I’m afraid the governor exaggerates,’ I said, thereby consolidating the story nicely with my audience; with the possible exception of Mostrue, who’d never quite taken my reputation at face value, and had spent most of my time with his regiment trying to nudge me into harm’s way to test it for himself. ‘But at least I can hold my head up in this company now, having seen a little action on Lentionia.’ I was rewarded, as I’d hoped, with a ripple of polite laughter.

‘You’re all to be commended for your efforts,’ I said, feeling that if I’d been brought here to give them a pat on the back and make everyone feel appreciated, I might as well make a start on the job as soon as possible. Not to mention reassure the population that Lentionia was once again safely within the fold of the Imperium, so anyone harbouring heretical sympathies had better think twice about it.

I filled a bowl with tanna and delivered it to Kasteen, thus bringing myself back into the governor’s orbit; along with that of most of the other Imperial Guard officers, who seemed even more keen to make her acquaintance than mine. (Which I could hardly blame them for, attractive women in the Imperial Guard being something of a rarity.)

‘Toren was just telling me about this mystery bug,’ I said. ‘I take it that’s the real reason the militia are still confined to barracks?’

‘It is.’ Jona nodded. ‘If we deploy them to keep the peace, before we’re sure who is or isn’t infected, it could get a foothold among the civilian population.’

‘Bioweapon?’ Kasteen asked, an instant before I could; a malady which seemed to strike down soldiers while leaving most of the civilians untouched seemed a suspicious coincidence to me too.

The colonel of one of the Vostroyan regiments shook his head, his extravagant moustache bristling. ‘First thing we thought of. But deploying something like that’s way beyond the insurgents’ capabilities.’

‘Unless it was one of the Chaos cults,’ I suggested. ‘Are any of them still active?’

‘Completely cleansed,’ the colonel of the Tallarn regiment assured me, before adding, ‘we would certainly have spotted the signs if they weren’t.’

‘I’m sure you would,’ I agreed. Tallarns are among the most devout followers of the Emperor in the galaxy, and if anyone could be counted on to detect traces of heresy, it would have been them.

‘So, an unfortunate coincidence,’ I said, although my innate paranoia was

still having a hard time accepting that, and kept worrying away at the matter despite my best efforts to get it to sit down and shut up. Which, I'm bound to say, failed; and, given how things were to work out in the end, that was probably no bad thing.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



*Editorial Note:*

*At this point one of the elisions typical of Cain's account of events occurs, picking up the narrative again after a period of several days. The following extract may go some way towards remedying this deficiency.*

From *The Liberation of Lentonia*, by Jonas Worden, uncompleted manuscript.

Despite his obvious reluctance to be separated from his regiment, Commissar Cain followed the path of duty, as I had no doubt he would once I'd got the measure of the man. I had harboured doubts before our first meeting, knowing how reputations can become exaggerated, but those had been laid to rest the moment I saw him bound from our immobilised car, resolutely determined to defend us from any further attacks without hesitation or thought for his own safety.

Accordingly, though it clearly chafed him to be feted in public, and fritter away time he would have preferred to spend bringing the Emperor's justice to those determined to prolong the conflict, he devoted himself to the ceremonial duties we concocted as doggedly as he would have done those on the battlefield.

The stratagem was undeniably successful, although the situation it was intended to divert attention from went from bad to worse. Despite the best efforts of both medicae and magos biologis, no effective treatment for the virus which had struck down so many gallant warriors was found, the

victims remaining either comatose or violently delirious depending on their level of sedation. Worse still, in spite of the rigorous quarantine to which all confirmed victims had been subjected, fresh cases kept occurring.

A week after their arrival, only the Valhallan 597th remained free of the disease, and no one expected this happy state of affairs to remain for much longer.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## THREE

‘Let’s hope that’s not a glimpse into our own future,’ Kasteen murmured to me, with a jaundiced look at the row of coffins facing us in the chancel of the cathedral. I’ve never been one for Emperor-bothering myself, but I’d been dragged into enough places of worship in the course of my duties to appreciate the ornate grandeur of this particular one, the soaring arches of the nave meeting high above us, obscured by shadows and the rising clouds of incense, while icons of the Emperor and His blessed saints cluttered up every available surface. There were twelve of the polished wooden caskets in all, containing the mortal remains of an officer and a line trooper randomly selected from the casualties of each of the six regiments which had put down the rebellion, to be commended to the Golden Throne with all possible ceremony in symbolic appreciation of the sacrifice of all the fallen. Throne alone knew what had happened to the rest, although I strongly suspected that they’d been interred with more regard for speed than for the niceties.

‘Any illness in the 597th yet?’ I asked, fidgeting on the ironwood pew, which was getting hideously uncomfortable already, and readjusting the scabbard of my chainsword for about the thousandth time, in a foredoomed effort to find a place where it wouldn’t dig into the tenderest part of my thigh. The Ecclesiarchy had been predictably sniffy about the number of sidearms the congregation had brought in with them, but as they were as much a part of the dress uniforms as the braid and the hat plumes, they just had to lump it.



To my relief, the colonel shook her head. I'd spent the last couple of weeks ricocheting around Lentonía shaking hands, inspecting troops, opening buildings, and, for a breathtakingly tedious couple of afternoons, posing for a portrait, which mainly seemed to involve waving a floor mop around; the artist had assured me that it would be miraculously transformed into an Imperial standard by the time he'd finished slopping paint on the canvas, and I pretended to believe him. This was the first opportunity I'd had to talk to Kasteen in person, and, since neither of us was particularly comfortable discussing sensitive matters over the vox, assess how matters stood in the planetary capital.

'No telling how long that's likely to last, though,' she replied, clearly expecting the worst.

'Did you clear the camps around the landing field?' I inquired, hoping to move the conversation on to less depressing matters, and Kasteen shrugged.

'Swept the ruins, but it was hardly worth the effort. Whoever was living there had already packed up and left.'

'Or got eaten,' I suggested, and Kasteen frowned.

'There was enough blood and bone around,' she agreed, not quite managing to hide her revulsion. 'But they'll be brought to account.'

'No Khornate shrines, I suppose?' I said, still unable to credit that Imperial citizens could fall so far without a little nudge from the Ruinous Powers, and the colonel shook her head.

'If there had been, we'd have burned the place out,' she assured me, and I nodded; I'd have expected nothing less.

At which point the choir struck up the processional, accompanied by appropriately solemn music, and I stood gratefully, while what seemed like half the senior ecclesiarchs on the planet<sup>10</sup> filed in, enveloped in richly embroidered ceremonial robes. Behind them came the local notables, led by Jona, although I failed to recognise him for the first few minutes, as he'd been smothered for the occasion in enough over-ornamented fabric to weigh down an ogryn. Spotting me at about the same time as the coin dropped, he favoured me with a rueful grin, clearly uncomfortable, but determined to see his duty through.

By this time the most absurdly overdressed of the Emperor botherers had broken free of the pack, leaving the secular contingent to seat themselves in the front row of the pews, while the remaining ecclesiarchs ranged themselves about the chancel according to their status and degree of

involvement in the ritual. Once everyone else had settled, the presiding cleric favoured us with a self-satisfied benediction, and began to pontificate about the nobility of sacrifice with all the pompous sincerity of someone for whom that meant being a little late for dinner, rather than dying an agonising death on a far distant world in the hope that it might somehow make an incremental difference in the fight to throw back the tide of darkness poised to roll over us all.

‘I now call upon Commissar Cain to say a few words,’ the prelate finished, having apparently exhausted his own supply at last, and I rose to my feet, conscious of the anticipatory murmur which rustled around the cavernous space. My feet echoed on the flagstones as I strolled forwards, trying to look both solemn and unhurried, feeling the pressure of two hundred pairs of eyes on the back of my neck as I did so. Not just them, either: a small constellation of servo-skulls was floating around the vaulting, carrying picters, intended to record my words<sup>11</sup> for posterity.

‘Thank you, hierophant...’ I hesitated a moment, before continuing in response to Kasteen’s silently-mouthed prompt, ‘Callister. We who defend the Imperium with our lives, our blood, and our very souls, are fully aware of the destination to which the path of duty so often leads...’ I broke off again, as a muffled scratching sound tickled my ear. It was barely perceptible, but it raised the hairs on the back of my neck even so; over the years I’d learned to distrust anything that sounded like stealthy movement, particularly if I was unable to get a line of sight on whatever might be causing it, and I had to consciously suppress the urge to reach for my weapons. I took a deep breath, hoping the unintended dramatic pause might be mistaken for a rhetorical flourish; not that it mattered anyway, the pict recordings would be edited before being disseminated to the local population, so I’d end up looking like a silver-tongued orator whatever happened.

So thinking, I launched myself back into my prepared speech, minor variations of which had served me well at far too many similarly depressing ceremonies over the years, only to falter yet again. This time a loud *thud* echoed around the cathedral, and a ripple of puzzled expressions spread among the pews, turning rapidly to unease as the sound was repeated. Kasteen unfastened the flap of her holster, an example followed by many of the officers from the other regiments here to speed their comrades to the Golden Throne, and I found the urge to do likewise impossible to resist.

‘Commissar!’ the pudgy prelate expostulated in horror as I loosened my chainsword in its scabbard. ‘This is a house of the Emperor!’

‘Then I’m sure He’d approve of us keeping it safe,’ I riposted, in no mood to debate the matter. The scrabbling sound had grown louder, to the point where I could no longer persuade myself that it was merely harmless vermin in the heating ducts; by now the front few rows of the congregation were tilting their heads, plainly trying to pinpoint the source. The thudding had increased too, in both volume and intensity, multiple blows overlapping one another in a steady roll of drums, like a panicky heartbeat. Whatever the cause, it was clearly time to be somewhere else, although I could hardly cut and run in front of so many witnesses. Then inspiration struck. ‘Regina<sup>12</sup>!’ I called above the hubbub. ‘Get the governor to safety!’

‘Everyone out!’ Kasteen called, picking up her cue perfectly, and drawing her bolt pistol to emphasise the point. ‘Make for the doors in an orderly fashion!’ Which, of course, civilians being civilians, might just as well have been ‘Mill around like panic-stricken sheep!’ Nevertheless, she and the other Guard officers managed to start herding the local dignitaries towards the exit, which was fine by me. True, the press of bodies in the aisle was effectively blocking me from making a run for it myself, but I’d been in enough places like this to be certain that the clergy had their own entrances and exits.

‘The back way,’ I said, turning to Callister. ‘Now the governor’s safe, I need to get you—’

‘What’s going on?’ Jona asked, materialising at my elbow, shrugging his encumbering vestments to the floor with every sign of relief. Beneath them he was wearing a shirt with frayed cuffs, and a pair of artisan’s trousers covered with pockets. ‘Are we in any danger?’

Before I could compose an adequate response to that which didn’t include the phrase ‘halfwit’, ‘cretin’ or ‘death wish’, I was interrupted by the sound of splintering wood, and whirled to face the serried coffins behind us. The noise was unquestionably coming from that direction, and for a moment I found myself wondering what kind of vermin or parasite could have found its way into the tightly-sealed boxes to gorge itself on the cadavers within. But the reality was worse than anything I could possibly have imagined.

With a further rending of wood, a Guard-issue combat boot smashed its way into view through the end of the nearest casket. Seeing it, the choristers around us promptly panicked and fled, with surprisingly melodious shrieks

of primal terror.

‘It’s a miracle!’ Callister genuflected towards the image of Him on Earth, and took a faltering step towards the flailing limb. ‘We have to help them!’

‘That’s not a miracle,’ I said, dragging him back by the arm; the hierophant knew the way out of here, and I wasn’t going to let him get himself killed before he showed me how to find it. ‘Quite the reverse.’

‘Warpcraft?’ Jona asked, sounding intrigued rather than frightened, and I shrugged, in as nonchalant a manner as I could, thumbing the selector of the chainsword to maximum speed. Jorgen’s presence would have answered that question quickly enough, but the mere thought of his image being pictcast to the world alongside mine at so solemn a ceremony had been enough to persuade me to leave him back at the garrison. A decision I rued heartily now, as his peculiar talent for nullifying any warp-spawned influences in his immediate vicinity had saved my skin on more than one occasion.

‘Probably,’ I said, hoping I’d be able to deal with the situation without my aide’s help for once. I tried to sound as if I knew what I was talking about. ‘But this is consecrated ground, so it’ll be weak if it is.’ At which point the prelate looked happier, even if nobody else did. I flinched, as the crackling of breaking wood redoubled in volume, and the abused coffin started to fall in on itself; the others were beginning to look distinctly fragile too. I began hustling the dignitaries away, as best I could with a weapon in each hand. ‘Now we need to get you out!’

He nodded, and turned to go, common sense finally overriding his old professional instinct to poke his nose into things, just as the nearest corpse flung the battered remains of its coffin aside and rolled from the bier supporting it, landing on the cold stone floor with a slap like a pistol shot. It lay still for a moment, incongruously clad in a neatly creased dress uniform, then thrashed its arms and legs as if trying to work out how to stand. I put a las-bolt into its chest as it clambered upright, but it rose slowly to its feet anyway, apparently unperturbed.

‘Keep back!’ I cautioned, with every intention of heeding my own advice, and got my first good look at the thing we were facing. It was unquestionably the cadaver of one of the Vostroyan soldiery, the extravagant moustaches cultivated by the Guardsmen from that world<sup>13</sup> standing out even more fully than usual against the withered flesh and sunken skin of its decomposing face. Its eyes were blank, rolled so far up

into the orbits that they showed little other than white, but the animate corpse seemed aware of our presence nonetheless; it raised a twisted hand, the nails of which seemed to have been elongated into talons by the decay of the fleshy fingertips behind them, and shambled forwards. I fired the laspistol again, with no more effect than the last time.

‘Stay dead, damn it!’ I snarled, although whether that was terror manifesting as anger or desperate entreaty I have no idea.

Jona seemed to take it for the former, however, aiming a tight smile in my direction, in spite of the fresh ambulatory carcasses bursting out of their wooden chrysalides on all sides of us. ‘Remind you of anything?’ he asked sardonically, backing away as he spoke. Now that he came to mention it, it did; the way the animate cadavers moved, with grim fixity of purpose, their expressions blank, was uncannily reminiscent of the mob which had attacked us on the way in from the starport.

The main difference was the sound, which I presumed the bodywork of the car had insulated us from before. This time I could hear it, a low, muffled groaning, emanating from all of them, as though they’d just woken to the kind of hangover where even your eyelashes ache. For all I know, they had<sup>14</sup>. At any rate it got on my nerves, and I fired a third time, taking the nearest revenant in the throat. This time the shot did have an effect, as it staggered, then began to move in short random jerks, bumping into its fellows and the biers as it did so.

Encouraged, I put a second las-bolt in the same spot, this time succeeding in severing the spinal column which the first had exposed through the ruin of the revenant’s neck. It dropped like a puppet with severed strings, a disquieting thought, because it rather begged the question of who was pulling them.

‘Will you stop frakking around and just run?’ I demanded, as the whole shambling mob began to close in on us. Which was easier said than done, as the aisle was still clogged with panicking local dignitaries. Among them I caught a glimpse of Kasteen, grimly fording her way towards us against the current, but unable to use her bolt pistol for fear of hitting an innocent bystander.

‘Avaunt!’ Callister cried, having a sudden and inconvenient rush of courage or misplaced piety to the head. He’d taken the golden aquila from round his neck, and was brandishing it in the general direction of the shuffling horrors bearing down on us. ‘In the name of the Emperor,

begone!’ Then the closest of them made a sudden snatch, which would surely have seized his arm and dragged him into the reach of its charnel-reeking jaws if its grotesquely elongated nails hadn’t snagged in the trailing sleeve of his chasuble. Exquisite embroidery tore as the talons ripped through it, and the hierophant leapt backwards with a squeak of alarm, bringing down his crozius on the crown of his assailant’s head as he did so. The heavy gold icon of Him on Earth crushed the revenant’s skull, and it slumped to its knees, foul-smelling fluid seeping from its eyes and nose.

‘Well done, your grace,’ I called encouragingly, hoping that he’d finally come to his senses after a squeak that narrow, and he nodded, looking both surprised and pleased with himself. ‘Now move your arse!’ I’d like to claim that my choice of phrase was a deliberate ploy, hoping to shock him into acquiescence by the sudden descent into profanity in these hallowed precincts, but if I’m honest I was simply too annoyed to care. There were still too many witnesses around for me to simply cut and run, however much I might wish to, and the longer these idiots insisted on lingering, the longer I’d be in imminent danger. Fortunately he listened this time, and scuttled back in my direction; which, with Jona now getting mired in the rush for the main door, left me in the uncomfortable position of being closest to the revenants.

Unwilling to turn my back on them, in case they rushed me as soon as they saw an opening<sup>15</sup>, I backed away slowly, keeping my chainsword raised in a guard position; which, though I had no idea of the fact at the time, looked as though I was covering the hierophant’s retreat, and did my fraudulent reputation no end of good. The one the prelate had poleaxed was on the floor now, still twitching, but in short, spasmodic movements, while the rest of the pack shuffled around it, spreading out slowly, like a patch of oil on the surface of a pond. Which was a worrying development. Already the ones on the edge of the group were approaching the limits of my peripheral vision, and I found myself worrying about being flanked as soon as I couldn’t keep all of them in sight at once.

I needn’t have worried too much on that score, though, as the revenants seemed to be wary of me, or perhaps of the weapons I carried. None had sufficient intellect left to seek cover, dropping below the level of the pews as I would have done, but they didn’t seem discouraged either, just moving forwards at a steady walking pace towards the gradually diminishing knot of struggling dignitaries jammed in the doorway. I put a couple more las-

bolts into the nearest, trying for head shots as these seemed the most effective, but succeeded only in blowing away part of its face and jaw, before an inconvenient pillar hid it from view.

‘Ciaphas!’ Kasteen shouted, breaking free of the scrum at last. ‘Look down!’ I did as she bade, and recoiled in horror; the revenant the hierophant had felled was crawling towards me, leaving a clotted trail of noisome fluid as it came, an outstretched hand on the point of seizing my ankle. I struck down with the chainsword, severing the limb at the elbow, but the animate cadaver didn’t even slow down, continuing to advance as inexorably as a necron. I hacked at it again and again, carving it into foul-smelling chunks, but it only stopped moving once I’d severed the spinal column.

‘Go for head shots!’ I called to the colonel, alarmed to see that while I’d been occupied the undead Guardsmen had dispersed even more widely. Of the hierophant there was no sign at all, which was encouraging in a way, as I’d be able to take the credit for saving his neck, but disconcerting too, as I’d hoped to see where he went and follow him as quickly as possible.

‘No need,’ Kasteen said, a trifle smugly, and fired her bolt pistol at one of the revenants closing in on Jona. Its ribcage blew apart as the explosive-tipped bolt detonated, decorating the intricate wood carving on the end of the nearest pew with half-rotted entrails. I took a shot at the other, which hit, but proved as ineffectual as ever, the las-bolt simply gouging a chunk out of the obscene thing’s right shoulder. Undeterred, it reached out for Jona with its left.

Warned by the slightly soggy explosion of Kasteen’s bolt, Jona looked up in alarm, and ducked out of the way in the nick of time. Unfortunately that left him between two pews, backing up as the motile cadaver plodded relentlessly after him. Even more unfortunately, one of the pillars supporting the ceiling was at the end of the gap, instead of an exit to the next aisle; a fact the young governor only became aware of when he backed into the immovable obstruction.

The brief flurry of activity had given another knot of undead troopers enough time to shamble uncomfortably close to me, so I turned and hurried up the nave, having little inclination to try my blade against the three of them at once; it would only take a single misstep or mistimed blow for one of them to get under my guard, and once that happened the weight of numbers would be certain to tell. The one on the left was wearing a Valhallan artilleryman’s uniform, and I glanced at what was left of its face



as I retreated with a faint sense of anticipatory dread, but of course it wasn't one I recognised. Few of the gunners I'd served with would still be attached to the 12th after all this time.

Finding myself coming abreast of the Vostroyan revenant chasing Jona I took an opportunistic swipe at its neck with my chainblade, decapitating the thing neatly. It collapsed where it stood, only a trickle of foul-smelling fluids seeping from the wound, in marked contrast to the geyser of blood which usually accompanied the severing of a head. The governor stared at me, wide-eyed, although he didn't seem to be hyperventilating this time, which was probably just as well considering the reek of the twice-killed corpse.

'Are you all right?' I asked, because I was supposed to, and the servo-skulls were still flitting about the place picting the scene.

'Think so,' Jona said, holding a handkerchief to a slight scratch on his cheek. 'Wouldn't have been in another minute.' He stepped fastidiously over the body. 'Thank you.' His words were almost drowned out by a crackle of gunfire, which echoed around the cathedral. Now that their lines of fire were no longer blocked by panicking civilians, the rest of the Imperial Guard officers had begun picking off the remaining revenants, and not before time if you asked me.

'What just happened?' Kasteen asked, joining us, her eyes still flickering in every direction in search of a target.

'I haven't a clue,' I told her honestly, hustling Jona ahead of us, towards the welcoming arch of sunlight beyond the ornately carved door. 'But we need to find out fast.' Something was very wrong on Lentonia, and if past experience was anything to go by, it was going to get a whole lot worse.





*Editorial Note:*

*Though not strictly necessary, I've decided to include another extract from Worden's account at this point. Cain provides enough information to make the events of the intervening period before he picks up his own narrative again perfectly clear, but since the additional material is available, it seemed sensible to use it.*

*I have rather less confidence in the wisdom of inflicting the second extract on my readers, but it does at least elucidate the military position into which the 597th was unceremoniously pitched; and those without the patience to wade through it are perfectly at liberty to skip the entire passage. Positively encouraged to, in fact.*

From *The Liberation of Lentonia*, by Jonas Worden, uncompleted manuscript.

After the incident in the cathedral made the true nature of the crisis we were facing all too horrifically apparent, no effort was spared to trace the source of the outbreak, and make sure it was properly contained. Having had the role of governor thrust unwillingly upon me, I was far out of my depth, but I was determined to do whatever was necessary to preserve Lentonia from any further harm. Though the job seemed incredibly daunting, I had the good advice of the Martial Law Council to rely on, not to mention the reassuring presence of Commissar Cain, who had faced and overcome many perils before. His experience, I was sure, would stand us in good stead in the dark days to come.

Ultimately, however, the decisions were mine alone to make<sup>16</sup>, and I was determined to face and fulfil my responsibilities.

From *Like a Phoenix on the Wing: the Early Campaigns and Glorious Victories of the Valhallan 597th* by General Jenit Sulla (retired), 101.M42.

Ever the woman of action, Colonel Kasteen lost no time in apprising the senior officers of the regiment of the full implications of the grisly discovery made by her and Commissar Cain. Not a woman or man among us could have entirely suppressed a thrill of primal horror at the revelation that our true foes were not the misguided insurrectionists we'd been called here to force back to acceptance of the Emperor's light, but the very dead themselves, ripped untimely from their graves by the foulest of warp-spawned sorceries. With so many of our gallant comrades-in-arms fallen victim to the contagion which had swept through their ranks, it fell to us, the only regiment thus far unscathed, to bear the brunt of this new and terrifying threat. Thus it was that the daughters and sons of Valhalla took to the streets of Viasalix, determined to guard it, and the rule of the Golden Throne, at all costs, including our own lives if necessary.

A price which, ere long, it seemed we might all be called upon to pay.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## FOUR

‘Are you sure?’ I asked, despite knowing that no one would have said a thing like that if they weren’t completely certain, and the magos biologists seated on the opposite side of the hololith nodded soberly in reply. I felt a faint flicker of surprise at that, as in my experience members of the Adeptus Mechanicus weren’t often given to such human gestures, but I suppose in his field of expertise he would have had less inclination to indulge in wholesale augmentation than the majority of his colleagues.

‘All the tests we’ve been able to run confirm it,’ he said, in a natural voice, tinged with a bone-deep weariness which, in its own way, was even more startling. Cogboys<sup>17</sup> tend to affect a calm, emotionless delivery, if they haven’t had their vocal cords replaced by a vox-coder to save them the bother; if this particular one was past caring how he sounded, the situation must have been dire indeed. ‘We are undoubtedly dealing with an outbreak of the Plague of Unbelief.’

‘I’ve heard the stories, of course,’ I said, looking from one horror-struck face to another, ‘but I always thought they must have been exaggerated.’ As befitted a crisis of this magnitude, we’d convened in the central command bunker of the Lentonian militia; which seemed fair enough to me, as there were hardly enough of them left on their feet to make use of it themselves. It was ideally suited to coordinating our own scattered forces, however. Those of us physically present were clustered around a hololith projector, in which the faces of the regimental commanders and other officials too busy to attend in person floated like worried-looking balloons, flickering

occasionally in the manner of such devices, and occasionally drifting through one another, or the three-dimensional image of the city above which they bobbed.

‘It’s real enough, believe me,’ Colonel Samier, the commanding officer of the Tallarn contingent, assured us, his loose desert tunic rustling as he leaned forwards for emphasis. ‘We encountered similar revenants on Ferantis.’

‘Then you’ll know how to beat them here,’ Jona interjected, his voice fizzling with static as his projected image flickered like an ill-attended campfire. One of the hovering tech-priests poked hopefully at the projectors, and the governor stabilised a little, although he still faded in and out of focus.

‘With the Emperor’s guidance,’ Samier agreed, making the sign of the aquila as he spoke.

‘If you’ve identified the virus, you must be able to begin treating it,’ Kasteen said, her voice and image flickering almost as badly as the governor’s. With the 597th at full stretch, holding down most of the city on its own, both she and Broklaw had been too busy to attend this meeting in person; I, on the other hand, had no desire to find myself pitchforked into the front lines again, and had been more than happy to spend a bit of time in the most heavily fortified bunker on the planet, in the name of effective cooperation with our fellow regiments. By way of a bonus, morale among what was left of the militia would have to improve to even reach rock bottom by this point, and having a Hero of the Imperium apparently going out of his way to liaise with them was helping no end with that.

‘I’m afraid it’s not that simple,’ the magos said, and I glanced surreptitiously at the data-slate on the table in front of me, trying to pick out his name. Moroe, that was it. I vaguely remembered being introduced to him at some reception or other shortly after our arrival, but we’d only exchanged a few words, tech-priests not being exactly renowned for their social skills. ‘According to the records, the virus mutates rapidly. No two outbreaks are ever the same, and an effective treatment has yet to be found. The only thing to be done is quarantine everyone known to have come into contact with the infection, and terminate any of them showing symptoms before they can pass it on.’

‘What about vaccination?’ my old sparring partner, Colonel Mostrue, put in. Like most of the other regimental commanders he was here only as a

projection, which didn't stop him giving me the fish eye just as coldly as if he'd been present in person.

'Haven't you been listening?' Moroe snapped, in a most un-tech-priest like manner; clearly his researches had been taking even more of a toll than I'd realised. 'There are so many strains of the virus, I wouldn't even know where to start.'

'With the Tallarns?' I suggested, earning a glare from Samier for my pains. Knowing how sensitive the natives of that desert world could be, I turned a little in my seat to address him directly. 'You must have been exposed to the virus on Ferantis.' I took another covert look at my data-slate as I spoke, finding that, as I'd expected, it had been the last warzone they'd fought in. 'You might have developed an immunity to it. Even if it's a totally different strain, as Magos Moroe has suggested, it could be a place to start.'

Samier started to nod, but before he could speak, the magos biologis cut across him. 'Perhaps it's not a different strain,' he said thoughtfully. 'You arrived before the rest of the regiments, and worked closely with the militia, who were the first to show symptoms. From there it spread to the Guard, and out into the civilian population.' He started punching keys and bringing up displays on his own slate, with a speed and precision which hinted at augmetic enhancements in his fingers and cortex, even though they weren't particularly visible.

What I could see of the Tallarn colonel's face behind his extravagant beard and voluminous burnoose darkened dangerously. 'You dare to suggest that we brought this contagion to Lentonia?' he said slowly.

'It's by far the most probable vector,' Moroe said, clearly missing the warning signs.

Samier's jaw tightened. 'Then explain to me how my men are almost entirely free of the disease,' he challenged.

Moroe looked uncomfortable. 'I can't,' he said. 'Unless they're carriers, somehow immune, but still able to pass on the virus.'

Samier grasped the icon of the Emperor hanging around his neck, his lips moving for a moment in some calming litany. When he spoke aloud again, it was with greater deliberation. Which might sound odd, but was actually fairly typical; the average Tallarn will call on the Emperor at the drop of a hat, and generally feel that He's answered, however unlikely that may seem to anyone else in the vicinity. (Any non-Tallarn, that is; their fellows will take it as read that Him on Earth has revealed His divine will, and go along

with even the most palpable idiocy. Luckily they seem to take it for granted that their officers and chaplains are granted the most cogent insights, otherwise they'd be completely unmanageable.) 'Then by all means, make your tests,' he said. 'If we discredit this nonsense as soon as possible, less time will be wasted.'

'And if you do turn out to be the carriers?' I said, because somebody had to, and he was least likely to take offence if it came from me.

'Then we do the Emperor's work in being the means of salvation for this world,' Samier responded, with neat circular logic.

'Throne be praised,' I said, mouthing the phrase and making the sign of the aquila at the same time he did<sup>18</sup>.

'But that wasn't what I meant.' I indicated the schematic of the city, which was speckled with icons like a case of the pox. Which, come to think of it, was far too apposite an analogy for my peace of mind. Each blemish represented a Guard unit, those tagged with the identifiers of the 597th or the Tallarns far outnumbering the others, or an incident involving another group of the walking dead, which had become more and more numerous in the days following the carnage in the cathedral. We'd had riots, too, as the news had spread and the panicking population became ever more desperate to escape the quarantine zones intended to protect them from infection. Throne alone knew where they expected to go, I doubt they knew themselves, but anywhere out of the city seemed to offer an illusion of safety. 'We're barely keeping a lid on things now. If your regiment has to be quarantined too, we're all frakked.'

'Then we should redeploy at once,' Samier said, rising from his seat to approach the hololith controls. After a moment, the positions of the icons shuffled around, to leave the 597th clustered in the city centre, securing the governor's palace, the Mechanicus shrine, and the Administratum cloister. 'My regiment will secure the boundaries of the quarantine zones, which, if the Emperor wills, we can do just as effectively from the inside as out.'

'Works for us,' the evanescent Kasteen agreed, after a moment.

I nodded too, although I was far from happy with the arrangement, which would leave us surrounded by potential enemies with nowhere to go so far as I could see. On the other hand, there was plenty of room in the palace grounds to land a shuttle, and I made a mental note to make sure we had one on standby. 'Makes good sense,' I said, as though I thought that was a sound reason for doing it.

‘Magos, a question,’ Mostrue interjected at this point. ‘What’s your prognosis for the Guardsmen already infected?’

Moroe looked surprised. ‘What it’s always been,’ he replied. ‘They’ll die. The virus will then stimulate electrochemical activity in the brain stem, restoring motor and sensory functions, after a fashion. The resulting revenant will be driven purely by instinct, principally aggression, and the need to feed.’

‘Then we should begin culling the sick immediately,’ one of the Vostroyan commissars stated flatly.

‘And burn the bodies,’ I added reluctantly. A nagging sense of something we’d forgotten gibbered quietly at the back of my head for a moment, before making itself heard at last. ‘What about the casualties from the fighting before we got here?’ I asked, already sure I wouldn’t like the answer. ‘They weren’t cremated, were they?’

‘No.’ Samier shook his head. ‘There was no time for ceremonial. They were buried in mass graves.’

A trickle of ice water seemed to run down my spine. ‘Where are they?’ I asked.

Everyone present looked from one to the other, and the floating heads in the hololith seemed equally baffled.

‘The city authorities would have handled that,’ Jona said. ‘But no one’s been keeping up with the filing lately.’ Big surprise there.

‘Try the Ecclesiarchy,’ I suggested. ‘They would have insisted on holding some kind of ceremony.’

‘I’ll get on to Callister,’ the governor promised.

‘Good.’ Much as I’d have liked to have remained in the bunker indefinitely, my morale-boosting role meant that I had to show my face to the troops, and be seen to be looking relaxed and unconcerned by the civilians to boot. I rose, trying my best to seem nonchalant. ‘I’ll discuss it with you when I get to the palace.’

‘You’re coming here?’ Even out of focus as he was, Jona’s face took on an unmistakable expression of surprise.

‘The redeployment,’ I reminded him. ‘We’ll be digging in all around you.’

‘Oh.’ He sounded as though he was trying to make light of the situation, and not succeeding very well. ‘That’s reassuring.’

‘I’m glad you think so,’ I said, wishing I shared his optimism.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)





*Editorial Note:*

*The following extract adds very little to Cain's account, but I've included it nevertheless, since it confirms much of what he implies about the prevailing situation.*

From *The Liberation of Lentionia*, by Jonas Worden, uncompleted manuscript.

Things got worse by the day. Bands of revenants were everywhere, and the Imperial Guard hunted them down wherever they could, trying to protect the civilians. Many citizens tried to flee the city, and became prey for the walking dead, but plenty were still willing to take the risk, and there were more riots as the Guard tried to keep the enclaves secured.

These disturbances got worse as food and medical supplies became scarcer. Lentionia had always relied on off-world imports, but with the plague confirmed, I was forced to close the system to merchant vessels. If we couldn't control the outbreak soon, we'd starve.

Emperor forgive me. I knew there was a reason I never wanted this job.



## FIVE

Jurgen was waiting for me outside the bunker as patiently as ever, paging through a porno slate, and basking in the cooling temperatures as the sun began to wester over the hab-blocks visible in the distance above the lower, functional buildings of the militia compound. Apart from my aide, his feet propped comfortably up on the dashboard of the still roofless Salamander, the complex of barrack rooms, workshops and parade grounds was almost deserted, the few troopers visible scurrying about their business in ones and twos in eerie silence. A place like this should have been bustling with activity, the tramp of marching boots, engines revving, and a constant crackle of lasgun fire from the practice butts echoing everywhere, but the loudest sounds I could hear were the moaning of the wind, and the gurgling of Jurgen's digestive tract.

'Good meeting, sir?' he greeted me, before dropping into the Salamander and firing up the engine. I clambered aboard gratefully, pulling my greatcoat a little tighter as I did so; although I suspected the shiver I'd felt had little to do with the freshening breeze.

'I've had better,' I told him honestly. So far as I could see, it all came down to whether the blood of a bunch of religious fanatics contained anything Moroe could create a vaccine from. Not odds I felt happy to be betting my life on.

'Back to RHQ<sup>19</sup>?' Jurgen asked, slamming the Salamander into gear, and I nodded, grabbing the pintle mount for support as he spun the treads and took off towards the gate at his usual breakneck speed.

‘Yes,’ I said, knowing Kasteen and Broklaw would be keen to discuss these latest developments a good deal more candidly than we could over a vox-link. ‘But swing by the palace first.’ If we were going to be deploying there we’d need a feel for the ground, which no map, however detailed, could give us, and I always felt happier in a new location after identifying any boltholes or lines of retreat. Besides which, it would give me a chance to talk to Jona; he was supposed to be our point of contact with the civilian authorities, insofar as there were any of those left at all, and he’d been worryingly uncommunicative of late. But then I imagined he had a lot on his mind.

‘Palace it is, sir,’ Jurgen confirmed, slowing with obvious reluctance in order to negotiate the gate without sending the little knot of apprehensive-looking sentries leaping for their lives. The usual fortifications had been supplemented with boxes, chemical drums, and anything else which had come to hand, and the barrels of a couple of sandbagged autocannon looked warily down the boulevard beyond, towards the heart of the city. Undermanned as the post was, I doubted whether it could have withstood a siege by sufficiently determined toddlers, but I dispensed a handful of morale-boosting platitudes as we trundled by, which the infantrymen seemed to appreciate. They dragged a couple of drums out of the way to let us pass with a fine display of efficiency, snapped me an unexpected salute<sup>20</sup>, which I returned in my best parade ground style, and began reassembling their makeshift barricade as Jurgen gunned the throttle again, and took off like a gretchin catching sight of an ork with a recipe book.

The slowly darkening city was an eerie sight as we howled down boulevards and thoroughfares deserted apart from the occasional prowling Chimera, their turret-mounted searchlights swinging as they stabbed into alley mouths and the shattered windows of looted emporia. Many of the waylights were still functioning, although deep lakes of darkness lay between these isolated patches of luminescence, casting flickering shadows in the depths of the buildings, in the cover of which anything might be lurking. Several times I caught glimpses of stealthy movement, or thought I did, and swung the pintle mount around to bear on it, but nothing inimical ever appeared, leaving me to wonder whether they’d been produced by solitary looters whose greed outweighed their sense of self-preservation, scavenging rodents, or my own imagination.

If I had begun to doubt the dangers of the journey, however, I was soon

disabused by the distant roar of a heavy bolter, quickly joined by another, and then a third. At least one of the patrolling Chimeras had evidently found a group of revenants large enough to require calling for reinforcements. The firing seemed a fair way away, but I'd been in enough cityfights to know how the sounds of combat could be distorted by the intervening buildings, echoes rolling back on themselves or being muffled by the surrounding hab-blocks, making direction and distance almost impossible to estimate with any degree of accuracy.

'Do you want to see what's happening?' Jurgen asked, his voice a little attenuated in my vox-bead.

'No need,' I said, quickly scanning the frequencies, and pinpointing the action almost at once. A Tallarn platoon in the process of redeployment had run into a mob of the revenants, just as I'd surmised, and was currently engaged in shooting their way out again. 'The Chimera crews have got the hatches sealed, and are picking them off with the bolters.' Which should indeed make short work of the shambling corpses. 'If we stick our noses in, we'd only get in the way.' Followed almost at once by attracting the unwanted attention of every surviving revenant in the group, since, unlike the Chimera crews safely locked away behind a few centimetres of armour plate, we were in a vulnerable scout vehicle. 'Just keep heading straight for the palace.'

'Right you are, sir,' Jurgen acknowledged, and, taking the instruction as literally as he did most other things, swung us off the road. The Salamander's suspension bounced over the raised kerb separating the carriageway from the pavement, then we burst through a pair of ornamental wrought-iron gates, which tore free of their hinges and went bouncing away with a clangour loud enough to be heard over the roar of our engine. Fortunately I'd grown used to his robust approach to driving over the years, and remained on my feet, after making a reflexive grab for the pintle mount the moment I felt the Salamander lurch to the right.

Clods of earth began to fly up from our spinning tracks, and I looked round to discover that we appeared to be hurtling across a wide, manicured lawn, rather more shaggy in appearance than the long-departed gardeners who used to work here would probably have approved of.

'Where are we?' I asked, more resigned than annoyed; after serving together for so long, I suppose I should have learned it was wise to qualify instructions like that with 'keeping to the road' by now.

‘City park,’ Jurgen informed me, in his usual matter-of-fact fashion. ‘Connects up with the palace grounds.’ A couple of intricately topiarised bushes disappeared beneath our tracks with a faint crunch. ‘Just past the Eternal Garden.’

‘Eternal Garden?’ I repeated, with a sudden sinking feeling. This far from the road we were surrounded by darkness and shadows, in which anything might lurk. Strange, amorphous shapes rose up out of the gloom, shrubberies perhaps, although everything beyond the cone of light thrown ahead of us by the Salamander’s headlamps might just as well have been hewn from solid chunks of the night itself. The glimmering pinpricks delineating the distant buildings surrounding this ocean of darkness seemed as remote as the stars which shone down from above with cold indifference.

‘That’s what it says on the map, anyway,’ my aide amplified. ‘Big building, lots of little ones. And a drive, leads to the road on the other side. Palace grounds are directly opposite where it comes out.’

‘I see,’ I said, as calmly as I could. ‘That should save us a bit of time.’ I pulled out the pocket-sized city guide Jona had thoughtfully presented me with shortly after my arrival, in spite of the fact that many of the major landmarks therein were no longer standing, and began to page through it in search of the one we were approaching. As I’d expected, there was quite a comprehensive entry, which was hardly surprising, given that it was the most notable burial ground in Viasalix.

‘Just what I thought,’ Jurgen said, as imperturbable as ever.

Ignoring the remark, I read feverishly, hoping to discover just how much trouble we were in, and gradually my initial panic began to subside. The necropolis was the ceremonial resting place of the planetary governors and other Lentonian notables, and as such was widely venerated by the locals. There didn’t seem to have been an interment there for years, however<sup>21</sup>, which came as a great relief: if no one had been buried since the outbreak, they were hardly likely to pop up again to cause me any trouble.

At which point the headlights picked out movement in the distance, as if part of the darkness had flowed away beyond the illuminated cone. Despite my rational mind insisting that it was probably no more real a threat than the shapes I thought I’d seen in the depths of the abandoned emporia, I checked the heavy bolter and fed the first round into the breach. I haven’t lasted long enough to reach an honourable retirement by letting rationality get the better of paranoia, and this occasion was to prove no exception.

The necropolis, when we reached it, turned out to be a surprisingly elegant building, rather than the over-ornamented stone barn my previous experience of such places had led me to expect. Rather, it was high and well-proportioned, tapering upwards to a sharply pitched roof supported by an elegant colonnade, the caryatids of which all turned pious faces towards the image of Him on Earth looking down benignly from beneath the eaves. The entire edifice had been faced in white marble, which appeared to glow faintly in the dim blue illumination of the stars, and lent it an ethereal quality perfectly in keeping with its rather grim purpose. A number of other tombs, far smaller, and, so far as I could make out in the darkness, rather less tastefully ornamented, surrounded it, like utility craft keeping station with a starship, and at the sight of those my apprehension increased considerably. Who had been interred within them<sup>22</sup>, or how recently, was anybody's guess, and I could be rather less sure than before that we were in no immediate danger.

'Give it a wide berth,' I said, and my aide complied, taking us in a long, wide arc around the ominous cluster of ossuaries. I strained my eyes through the darkness, expecting at any moment to catch a glimpse of sinister shadows moving among them, but still I saw nothing; then Jurgen abruptly swung the Salamander back towards the boneyard.

'We'll have to cut across the corner of it,' he said, as though it was only a minor inconvenience. 'We'll get stuck in the trees otherwise.'

I turned, looking out to the right, instead of leftwards towards the necropolis. Sure enough, the night seemed darker in that direction, stars and city lights alike occulted by a solid bank of vegetation, looming against the horizon like a low-lying thunder cloud. Hanging on to the heavy bolter by one hand, for fear of another sudden change of direction, I glanced down at the plan in the book, finding the patch of woodland much smaller in its graphic representation than it appeared to be in reality. The drive leading to the gate on the other side of the park was relatively close, but we'd have to make our way through a slalom of tombs now in order to reach it. Which would mean slowing down, which would, in turn, leave us more vulnerable to attack. (Why it occurred to neither of us to simply return to the gate by which we'd entered the park in the first place I have no idea; all I can think of is that we were both so keyed up by that time, and, in my case at least, so fearful of attack, that we were thinking of nothing else beyond our original goal.)

There was still no movement that I could see, so I thumbed my palm<sup>23</sup>, asked the Emperor's protection (despite being convinced that He had far more pressing matters to attend to than preserving my miserable hide, but it never hurt to ask), and curled my fingers around the grip of the heavy bolter. 'Take us in,' I said, feeling as ready as I'd ever be.

Jurgen complied, as phlegmatically as he did everything else, and the growling note of our engine dropped an octave. We slowed, and began to move towards the low-lying huddle of satellite tombs at a more sedate pace, the bright glare of the headlights picking out every detail. Some were almost pristine, testament to the industry of the living who still mourned the occupants, while others were encrusted with lichen and climbing plants, which scrambled over crumbling devotional icons, in the worst cases all but obliterating them.

'Oops,' Jurgen commented, as he failed to negotiate a turn, and ended up sideswiping a large and imposing mausoleum which barred our way. Cast rockcrete crumbled and split, dislodging a few chunks of debris which clanged and clattered into the passenger compartment, fortunately without braining me in the process, and a particularly tasteless cherub was reduced to gravel beneath our treads. 'Better drop another gear.'

'That might be prudent,' I said, brushing the worst of the dust and pigeon droppings from the peak of my hat; behind us a sidewall collapsed, and the whole edifice slumped like an inebriate who simply can't be bothered with the effort of remaining upright any longer. I half expected the whole thing to crumble into rubble, but it remained standing after a fashion, although how long it remained so after our departure I wouldn't like to hazard a guess. With a grinding of gears we dropped to little more than walking pace, turning frequently to pass along the widest gaps between the piles of monumental masonry.

At first, it seemed, the war had left this hamlet of sepulchres unscathed, at least until our visit, but after a few more moments I began to pick out signs of damage to several of the tombs we passed. Doors had been forced, hanging from their hinges or swinging gently in the wind, and Jurgen had clearly spotted them too; he hawked and spat, a sure sign of his disgust. 'Grave robbers,' he said, in the same tone of voice he might have used to refer to heretics.

'Let's hope so,' I said, examining the next one we passed as closely as I could from my perch behind the heavy bolter. So far as I could see it had

been broken into, rather than out of, which was something at least. 'There must be a lot worth stealing down some of these holes.' For reasons I've never been able to fathom, a substantial number of the wealthy and powerful seem to feel that if they can't take it with them they can at least keep it to hand, lavishing a small fortune on ornamentation and *objets d'art* to make their last resting place look as much like a courtesan's boudoir as possible.

If Jurgen felt disposed to respond to the remark, he never got the chance; a pallid figure suddenly appeared in the headlights, staring dumbly in our direction, as though mesmerised. That it was a revenant I never had a moment's doubt, the ravages inflicted on its flesh by the teeth and nails of its fellows perfectly plain in the glare of the luminators, bone showing through in several places where muscle had been torn or gnawed away. The frenzied attack which had killed it had left few of its garments intact, but the shreds which remained hinted at some lowly occupation in one of the manufactories. Before I could take in any more Jurgen gunned the engine, and the hideous apparition abruptly disappeared beneath the Salamander, with a faint crunching sound.

'Looks like some of them are up and about,' my aide remarked, as though the matter were only of minor interest.

'That one hadn't been buried here,' I said, ignoring the unsavoury heap of offal left in our wake in favour of keeping an eye out for more. But in that case, what was it doing here? A question I was soon to have answered, as a whole group of the things appeared up ahead, barring our way, like the ones who'd overwhelmed the car on the way in from the landing field. The Salamander was a good deal more sturdy, however, not to mention armed, and this time we'd be far from easy meat.

'Flamer, sir?' Jurgen asked, and I was about to answer in the affirmative when the bulk of a sepulchre larger and more ornate than most of the rest loomed up out of the darkness, barring our way.

'Bolter,' I said. 'The backwash from that wall might catch us too.'

'Bolter it is,' Jurgen confirmed, and triggered the sturdy little vehicle's main armament, chewing the advancing revenants to pieces, while I swung the pintle mount, picking off a few on the fringes of the crowd. The handful of survivors continued to shamble towards us, as heedless of the fate of their fellows as advancing tyrannids, only to fall beneath our spinning treads



for their pains. 'That's seen 'em off.' As he spoke, he swung us ninety degrees, so we were running parallel to the large tomb, and, to my inexpressible relief, I saw the gravel drive we'd been making for just ahead of us.

'Let's hope so,' I said, but no sooner were the words out of my mouth than I felt something clutch at my ankle. I looked down, to find that one of the revenants we'd run over had survived the experience, grabbing hold of the Salamander's chassis as the tracks passed either side of it, and was now in the process of hauling itself aboard. Drawing my chainsword, I struck down at it by reflex, the teeth whining as they bit into matt-black body armour. The fingers refused to relinquish their grip, and I kicked out at the revenant's head, with equal lack of effect; my boot hit bone with enough force to incapacitate a living opponent, but there wasn't a lot I could do to this one that hadn't already happened.

Then it raised its head, bringing the necrotising flesh of its face into view, and I reeled with the shock of recognition. The household guard uniform ought to have been enough of a clue, I suppose, but under the circumstances I'd had little opportunity for ratiocination, and the sudden realisation that my assailant was Klarys rattled me badly. The last I'd seen of her she'd been on her way to a sanatorium, her injuries severe, but hardly life-threatening<sup>24</sup>.

There was no doubt that for some reason she'd succumbed to them, however. Her very presence here attested to that, not to mention the stench of decay that surrounded her ambulatory cadaver. Changing my point of aim, I brought the spinning blade down on her neck, severing her head in a single swipe. The hand around my ankle relaxed its grip, and I kicked the suddenly inert body clear, boosting it up and out of the passenger compartment, while the loose head rattled around the box of armour plate like a discarded scrumball.

Hardly had I time to draw breath than a resonant *thud* behind me snatched at my attention. Another pair of revenants had managed to board us, this time by jumping from the roof of the tomb we were skirting. I swung my chainsword at the one reaching for me, almost choked by the stench of it, and was rewarded with a spray of corruption as the spinning blade sliced through its chest, neatly bisecting it. The upper section began pulling itself towards me with grim determination, and I struck down, intending to decapitate it as I had done the motile remains of Klarys, but at that moment

the Salamander lurched violently, and I stumbled, the whining blade raising sparks from the floorplate instead.

‘Jurgen!’ I called. ‘What the hell’s going on?’ The Salamander slammed sideways into the tomb, raising a cloud of dust, and a shriek of abused metal, before veering away in the opposite direction.

‘Sorry, sir. Bit busy.’ My aide was attempting to fend off another revenant, with only his hands and a hastily-drawn combat knife to defend himself with, which, not unnaturally, made it difficult to concentrate on steering at the same time.

Compensating for our erratic progress, I aimed my blade more accurately on the second attempt, adding another to my impromptu collection of heads, and leaned over the sheet of armour plate separating the passenger compartment from the driver. Then I hesitated. I didn’t dare hack at the revenant, for fear of hitting Jurgen instead, and attempting to shoot it was even less of an option. Leaving my aide to fend for himself was equally unthinkable, however, as if we stopped I had no doubt that we’d be overrun with the revenants I was certain still lurked among the mausolea.

‘Hang on,’ I said, hoping my reluctance didn’t show in my voice, and clambered over the sill of the armour plate, keeping my balance with difficulty. The Salamander was an old one, the guard plates protecting the upper treads removed for maintenance, if they’d even been fitted in the first place, and I found myself teetering perilously close to the rapidly-moving band of jointed metal, all too aware that one misstep would whirl me away to a messy death beneath our tracks.

‘Hanging on, sir,’ Jurgen responded automatically, as though the words of encouragement had been an order, and sliced at the revenant’s throat in what would have been a killing strike if any blood remained in its veins to have been shed. As it was, the gaping wound he opened up had little effect, other than to make its recipient even less prepossessing than it already had been. Then the Salamander jolted over some hidden obstruction, almost pitching me from its back, and I flailed wildly for balance, dropping the chainsword as I clutched instinctively for a handhold. The weapon fell back into the passenger compartment, narrowly missing taking my leg off in the process, where it proceeded to rattle around, striking sparks from the armour plate and pureeing whatever bits of re-killed revenant it happened to come into contact with. I certainly didn’t envy whoever was going to annoy their immediate superior enough to get landed with the job of cleaning that

lot up.

Unfortunately, the nearest thing to grab hold of in an attempt to steady myself had been the revenant, and it responded in precisely the way you'd expect, by dropping my aide and turning on me. A cloacal stench assaulted my nostrils as it twisted, trying to get round and bury its teeth in my neck. My only chance was to remain behind it; I'd grabbed its shoulder while trying to remain upright, so I extended that arm across its chest, and took hold of my own wrist, which I'd pushed forwards under the preternaturally energetic cadaver's armpit. By instinct it tried to duck out from under my upper arm, pushing up with its legs as it did so. Sensing the move, even over the jouncing of the Salamander, I twisted too, assisting it on its way, and throwing it to the side, trying to ignore the disquieting way its flesh gave way beneath my grip. The weight of the thing pulled me up and over along with it, and I fell hard against the upper hull, slamming into the metal a mere handspan from the whirling tracks.

The revenant wasn't so lucky. For a moment it clung on, maintaining a vice-like grip on the lapel of my greatcoat, while the spinning metal treads abraded its flesh away in a spray of stinking corruption, and I felt myself slipping inexorably towards the same grim fate. Then the cloth ripped, parted by the keen edge of Jurgen's knife, and the foul thing abruptly disappeared, thrown out ahead of us by the speed of the tracks. Whether we passed over it a moment later I have no idea, but by that point I was past caring anyway.

'That was the last of them,' my aide said, while the Salamander finally trundled clear of the huddle of sepulchres. He wiped a bloodied hand across his cheek, and dropped back fully into the driver's compartment. The engine roared, and I grabbed another handhold as we began to accelerate, leaving the nest of necrotic corruption behind us.

'You're hurt,' I said, dropping into the noisome mess of the passenger compartment, hastily deactivating my chainsword, and scrabbling for the medi-kit. The last thing I needed now was for Jurgen to pass out from blood loss while we were still running at full throttle.

'It's just a scratch,' he assured me. 'I've had worse.'

'It'll need a stitch or two,' I said, leaning across to apply a dressing and a generous slug of counterseptic, which at least staunched the worst of the bleeding. The outer weave darkened a little, but nothing seeped through, and I began to breathe a little easier. At least, I reflected, I'd have an

interesting anecdote for the governor when we met.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## SIX

‘What do you mean he can’t see me?’ I demanded, in my most commissarial manner, and the household trooper barring the corridor leading to Jona’s private apartments quailed visibly. Technically, I suppose, he was a vassal of the governor’s rather than a member of the Imperial military, and beyond my jurisdiction, but in his shoes I wouldn’t have wanted to rely on so minor a distinction either. His face was hidden behind one of those polarised helmet visors, but his posture betrayed his uncertainty, and the ingratiating tone of his voice confirmed it.

‘Governor Worden has given strict instructions not to be disturbed,’ he told me.

‘Then he’s in the wrong job,’ I said, unsympathetically. ‘Where is he?’

I’m not sure if it was the tone of command, my dishevelled appearance, or the odiferous traces of former revenant still bespattering my uniform which decided him, but after a moment’s hesitation his head turned fractionally towards an ornately carved door at the end of the corridor. ‘His chambers,’ he said, reluctantly. ‘But I can’t let you through. My orders...’

‘Would it help if you told him I threatened to shoot you?’ I asked, amiably.

‘It might,’ the guard admitted. ‘But you haven’t.’

‘Because I never make threats,’ I lied shamelessly. ‘Consider it more a point of information.’ And I let my hand drift casually to the laspistol at my belt. If he’d called my bluff, I’m not sure what I would have done, but I’d judged my man well, and after a brief show of hesitation for the record, he stood aside.

I nodded my thanks, and padded up the corridor towards the doorway, my footfalls muffled by a carpet thick enough to have concealed a ratling with a long-las. I considered knocking, but decided against it, as it would give Jona the chance to tell me to frak off, and there was no point in getting into an argument before we'd even come face to face. I'd had enough conflict for one evening already, and was in no mood for more.

As I reached out for the door knob, my boot clattered against something lying on the carpet, and I glanced down to find that I'd just avoided stepping on a laden silver salver. The plate on it was full of something which would have seemed appetising had it not been left to cool and congeal for several hours, thus rendering it quite the opposite, although the dessert, some kind of pastry, had fared a lot better. I frowned. Jona was undoubtedly busy, we all were, but he hadn't struck me as the kind of man who'd get too distracted to remember to eat.

I tried the door, half expecting it to be locked, but the catch clicked open; it seemed the new governor was getting sufficiently used to his unexpected elevation to expect his minions to do as they were told. Picking up the tray, I walked in, pushing the door closed again behind me with my foot.

I found myself in a large and elegant drawing room, equipped with the usual accoutrements of sofas, side tables and the like, ranged about a fireplace in which logs had been piled ready for lighting. Jona was at the far end, behind an ornate desk of glossy brown wood, inlaid with the seal of his office, shuffling stacks of paper and muttering into a vox-recorder. For a moment he remained unaware of my presence, then lifted his head to stare at me. 'What are you doing here?' he shouted. 'Get out!'

I've been shouted at by far more intimidating specimens in my time, none of whom could hold a candle to the proctor of my old schola progenium (although the odd daemon came close), so the prospect of gubernatorial ire left me completely unmoved. 'I brought your lunch,' I said, although for all I knew the tray could have been left at breakfast time, and carried on walking towards him unperturbed.

'I'm not hungry,' Jona said, the anger in his voice replaced by uncertainty; something I've frequently observed happens if you respond to an aggressor in a manner they're not expecting.

'You must be,' I insisted, the vague sense of something being wrong that had settled over me at the discovery of the tray outside intensifying as I drew closer to the desk. I put the meal down on top of the papers littering its

surface, and got my first close look at the man. ‘Throne on Earth, you look terrible.’

‘Too much work.’ His face was flushed, and swollen, the eyes febrile. ‘But everyone’s overstretched. Have to set an example.’ He coughed, turning his head away, and the scratch on his cheek from the scuffle in the cathedral came into view. I’d have expected it to have healed by now, but it was livid and swollen, badly infected.

‘You should still get some sleep,’ I demurred, fighting the impulse to back away. If he was contagious enough to have passed the infection on to me, I’d have been a dead man the moment I stepped through the doorway in any case, which was hardly a comforting reflection.

‘Sleep. Yes, good idea,’ he agreed, rubbing his eyes. ‘Don’t know why they’ve got the heating on this time of year. Do you?’

‘I’ll look into it,’ I assured him, my mind whirling, assessing the implications of this horrifying development. We had to keep his condition a secret, that much was certain. The governor was a symbol of the Emperor’s protection, at least in the minds of most of the populace, and if it got out that he’d succumbed to the sickness, the civil disorder we’d seen already would increase a thousandfold. Not to mention the fact that the minute his relatives discovered the truth we’d be up to our ears in fratricidal nobles, scrabbling to fill the vacant throne, and we had enough distractions to deal with already.

I skirted the desk, keeping the ornate slab of polished wood between us as though that would be any barrier to an airborne virus, looking for a vox. It was right where I expected it to be, and I lost no time in using it.

‘Magos Moroe,’ I began, as soon as the cogboy’s face appeared in the pict screen above it, ‘there’s been an unfortunate development. Your assistance, and your discretion, are both required.’



## SEVEN

It was another three days before I was able to discuss matters with the magos in person, and by that time the situation had gone from bad to worse. The plague continued to spread among the civilian population, and the first few cases had been confirmed among the 597th, which made the redeployment we'd arranged with the Tallarns seem like a complete waste of effort.

'It was bound to come,' Broklaw said grimly, responding with all the stoicism I would have expected to the news that a couple of squads of our troopers<sup>25</sup> had had to be sacrificed to save the others. At least my own tests had come back negative, so it seemed my brief exposure to Jona had done no harm, but I couldn't help wondering how long the unexpected reprieve would last.

'I had hoped it would take a while longer,' I said, following him into the compact and well-equipped operations centre we'd found after taking over the wing of the palace which normally housed the household troops. An eviction they no doubt resented, but since there were so few of them, relatively speaking, none of them had raised any objections, at least in my hearing.

I looked around for Kasteen as we entered the room, but it seemed she wasn't back from her meeting with Samier yet. The two of them were supposed to be coordinating strategies for hunting down revenants more effectively<sup>26</sup>; but every day saw more of the walking corpses rising from the dead, and, barring a miracle, we'd be back on the defensive for good before



long. At least the ones I'd found in the necropolis, drawn there by the abundance of carrion to feed on, had been cleared out by flamer-wielding Guardsmen by now; but for every pocket we found and cleansed, there were probably a dozen others left undiscovered, where the taint continued to fester and the threat continued to grow.

'Commissar.' Moroe was waiting for us, gazing at the hololith display, in which the number of runes indicating active units continued to dwindle with dispiriting inevitability. Divas's artillery company was still in the fight, though, and I was unexpectedly cheered by that; he could be undeniably irritating at times, but in my vocation you make precious few friends, and I'd have been loath to lose one, particularly in so vile a manner. 'I have the information you requested.'

'Any progress?' Broklaw asked, clearly expecting the answer to be in the negative.

'Some,' the tech-priest replied, with the flat intonation favoured by his brethren, leaving his listeners to infer as best they could whether he was pleased, despondent, or indifferent; which, given his audible emotion at our first meeting, I hoped was some sort of encouraging sign. 'We have indeed succeeded in isolating promising antibodies in the blood of the Tallarn soldiery, just as Commissar Cain surmised.'

'Excellent,' I said, feeling the first faint flare of hope since this nightmare had begun. 'Is there any prospect of producing a vaccine from it?'

'More than a prospect,' Moroe said, in the same maddening monotone, which left me struggling as before to discern whether this was good news or bad. 'We have succeeded in producing one, which, with the correct bio-cultures, we can synthesise in greater quantities. However, our trials with infected subjects have been entirely negative.'

'You mean it doesn't work,' Broklaw said, in the tone of a man who's just won a bet with himself, and badly doesn't want to pay up.

'Precisely,' Moroe said. 'For reasons which, quite frankly, continue to elude us.'

'How so?' I asked, then held up a forestalling hand. 'In plain, simple Gothic.' I'd spoken to too many tech-priests over the years not to realise that the rider was essential, if I didn't want to be subjected to an interminable lecture that only a fellow member of the Cult Mechanicus would have understood in the first place.

The magos biologis looked as uncomfortable as it was possible to with

half a face composed of immobile ironmongery. ‘The serum should prove effective,’ he said. ‘We can find no biological reason why it doesn’t.’

‘I’m sure you’ll discover one soon,’ I said, though whether to bolster his morale or my own I had no idea. ‘How’s the governor?’

‘Degrading rapidly,’ Moroe said, his monotonous voice lending an air of sombre finality to the pronouncement. ‘Hierophant Callister is providing spiritual succour, which seems all the aid possible at the moment.’ Anyone else would have been granted the Emperor’s Peace long ago, but, as I said, political expediency meant keeping the poor bastard alive as long as we could. Besides, I suppose Moroe needed someone to test his potions on.

‘Is he still around?’ Broklaw asked, and I nodded; the ecclesiarch had turned up the previous evening, with the maps we’d asked for pinpointing the mass burial sites, and seemed in no hurry to return to the relative danger of the revenant-infested city; which I can’t say I blamed him for<sup>27</sup>.

‘Let’s hope he doesn’t come down with it too,’ I said, conscious that I’d spent some time with the stricken governor myself, and been lucky to get away with it.

‘Possible, but unlikely,’ Moroe assured us. ‘The virus spreads relatively slowly in most cases, and typically takes two to three weeks to manifest.’

‘Then how come Jona came down with it so fast?’ I asked. A memory of our wild drive through the necropolis bubbled to the surface. ‘And his bodyguard, Klarys. She was killed and resurrected far quicker than that.’

‘I was speaking of airborne infection,’ Moroe said, pedantic as only a cogboy could be. ‘Governor Worden was scratched by a revenant in the cathedral, which must have delivered the virus directly into his bloodstream. Such a mechanism may well account for the frequently observed accelerated progress of the disease in others directly wounded by them.’

‘Jurgen,’ I said, a cold knot of horror tying itself around my gut. One of the revenants had laid his face open, a far deeper and more serious wound than Jona had suffered. If the cogboy was right, my aide was probably doomed.

‘He’s over there,’ Broklaw said, completely mistaking my meaning, and a second or two later the aroma of socks of archaeological antiquity announced Jurgen’s arrival.

‘Thought you might need something to eat, sir,’ he said, holding out a plate of sandwiches made with some local cheese, which smelled as though

it had spent some time in an ogryn's athletic support, and a steaming mug of tanna.

'Thank you, Jurgen,' I said, taking them mechanically, although you can be sure I would have starved rather than consume either under the circumstances, and studying his face as I did so. The dressing on his cheek was now pale grey, but there was no sign of sepsis in any of the skin that I could see between clumps of beard and eruptions of psoriasis, his flesh remaining as pallid as ever beneath its patina of grime. No sense in taking any risks, though, given the virulence of what we were dealing with. I indicated the dressing as I deposited the plate on a convenient desk, and kept my voice casual. 'Isn't it time you took that to the medicae for assessment?'

'This?' Jurgen looked baffled for a moment, and scratched the padded bandage absently. 'I'd forgotten all about it, to be honest.'

'Then it's high time you were reminded.' I winced theatrically, conscious that I needed an excuse to accompany him without Broklaw and the magos thinking anything was out of the ordinary. 'I'd better come too. See if they've got anything for heartburn.'

'If they have, bring some back,' Broklaw said, with a jaundiced look at the abandoned snack. 'That cheese is lethal.'



*Editorial Note:*

*Appended without comment.*

From *The Liberation of Lentonia*, by Jonas Worden, uncompleted manuscript.

Vox record now. Can't hold... thing. Makes marks.

So tired. Can't sleep.

Dreams of blood. Always blood.

Can't be sick. For them.

Hate this job.

Hate them.

Always blood...

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## EIGHT

I waited tensely, while the Sister Hospitaller on duty in the aid station peeled the soiled primary aid strip away from my aide's face. He winced a little as it tore free, and a few clinging facial hairs and fragments of scab accompanied it into the clinical waste bin. The Hospitaller tutted.

'Don't be such a baby. There's nothing there.'

'There isn't?' I craned my neck to look at site of the wound, remembering the slick of blood and the ragged edge of torn flesh I'd patched up less than seventy-five hours<sup>28</sup> before.

'See for yourself.' The Sister swabbed the last of the clotted blood away, creating an oasis of flesh-coloured skin among the encircling grime, in the centre of which a barely-visible ridge of pinkish scar tissue was fading back to a healthy glow; or at least as close to it as Jurgen ever got.

I blinked in bemusement, while my aide turned his head from side to side, examining the site of the wound from every angle in the reflective surface of the Sister's desktop pict screen. 'Told you it was only a scratch,' he said.

Which might have resolved matters to my aide's satisfaction, but certainly didn't to mine. If Moroe was right, and he'd certainly seen enough cases, no one should have been able to shrug off the infection which would have followed on from a revenant bite as surely as night followed day. True, Jurgen had been remarkably healthy for as long as we'd served together, most of the bugs which had tried to infect him finding rather too late that it was more like the other way around, but he showed no signs of contagion at all. Come to that, the gash in his cheek shouldn't have knitted together

anything like as quickly as it had done either.

The only possible explanation I could see was that it had something to do with his peculiar talent for nullifying the powers of the warp; but that led inescapably to the conclusion that there must be something unnatural about the virus itself. Which would certainly explain why Moroe's vaccine didn't seem to be working; it probably was on the purely physical level, but if the problem went deeper, and warpcraft of some kind was involved, that wasn't going to be enough.

So I brooded in silence as Jurgen and I made our way back to the operations room, wondering what to do for the best. If I passed on my insight to Moroe, he might be able to find a way of making the vaccine work, and save this world, its population, and my own hide, in ascending order of importance. On the other hand, doing so without revealing my aide's secret, thereby bringing down the wrath of Amberley by making him a high priority target for any other inquisitors in the vicinity who fancied adding a blank to their entourage<sup>29</sup>, seemed impossible. And why were the Tallarns relatively immune to the disease? It was hardly likely there were any blanks among them, let alone that they all were.

So musing, I passed along the corridors of the palace paying little attention to my surroundings, only coming back to myself with a start as someone called my name. Turning, I found Kasteen walking towards us, the Tallarn colonel unexpectedly at her heels.

'Colonel. Colonel.' I greeted them each in turn, Kasteen first, then extended a hand to Samier. 'I must confess I'm surprised to see you.'

'And I to be here.' He sighed, with the air of one prepared to discharge an onerous duty. 'But the hierophant is requesting an escort back to the cathedral precincts, and under the circumstances he'll be safer in my Chimera than a civilian vehicle.'

Which was undeniably true; but in his shoes I'd just have assigned the nearest duty sergeant to round up a squad of Guardsmen, instead of running the errand myself. But that was Tallarns for you, never slow to curry favour with the Ecclesiarchy, and I suppose he felt someone of the hierophant's standing should be babysat by someone senior as a matter of protocol<sup>30</sup>.

'I take it the meeting was productive?' I asked, and Kasteen nodded.

'We've hammered out some new strategies,' she said. 'I'll be holding a briefing in the morning.'

'I'll look forward to that,' I said, with a lack of sarcasm I found vaguely

surprising. 'I'm sure Colonel Samier's experience of fighting these things on Ferantis will have given you some useful insights.'

'Let us hope so,' Samier agreed. 'Although at least here the packs are disorganised, operating entirely on instinct.'

'And they weren't on Ferantis?' I asked.

The Tallarn colonel shook his head. 'By no means. They were being herded by the blasphemous acolytes of the Great Enemy.'

'You mean Chaos cultists?' I said, my head buzzing with a half-formed realisation. 'Wyrds, sorcerers, that kind of thing?'

'Worse,' Samier said, glowering. 'Priests of the disease god.'

'Nurgle,' I said, hearing an audible gasp from the Tallarn colonel's aide at the very mention of the foul name. But Samier was made of sterner stuff.

'Quite so.' He nodded. 'They called this foul pestilence a blessing, and drove its victims against our guns. But we cleansed them all, in fire and our faith in the Emperor.'

At which point Callister wandered into the hall, in earnest conversation with Moroe, the half-overheard gist of which was that Jona was on his way to check in at the Golden Throne before too much longer, and there didn't seem a damn thing either of them could do about it. At the sight of them together, and the smell of my aide at my shoulder, the last pieces of the puzzle clicked together in my mind.

'Magos,' I called. 'Your grace, I think I have a solution to our problem.'

'The governor's condition has stabilised,' Moroe reported, a few hours later, walking into the command centre. 'Physically, anyway, although very little of his mind is left. But how did you know?' Despite his best efforts to sound as bland as cogboys normally did, he couldn't keep his astonishment entirely out of his voice, and I permitted myself the indulgence of feeling smug for a moment.

'Seeing you and the hierophant together, it suddenly made sense,' I said. 'Especially after what Colonel Samier had just told me. It just struck me that the contagion might have been spiritual as well as physical, and that the piety of his men was what had preserved them from it.' Which let me skirt neatly around the issue of Jurgen's abnormal reaction to a revenant bite without having to mention it at all.

'Which meant that blessing the vaccine would make it effective against the lingering taint of... of one of the Ruinous Powers,' Callister cut in, to show

he was keeping up, and fastidiously avoiding mention of Nurgle by name.

‘It seemed worth a try,’ I said. ‘The Tallarns always say faith is the strongest weapon in their arsenal, and in this case it was literally true.’

‘Can you bless the rest of the stock?’ Kasteen asked, bringing the discussion back from the realms of the numinous to the strictly practical, like the exemplary officer she was.

‘Of course.’ The hierophant puffed himself up a little, clearly delighted to be the centre of attention. ‘Do you have much on hand?’

‘A few phials only,’ Moroe admitted. ‘But now it’s proven its efficacy, we can produce more.’

‘Do we have enough on hand to immunise the regiment?’ I asked, and the tech-priest nodded.

‘I would say so. Most of it, anyway.’

‘Throne be praised,’ Kasteen said, to which the hierophant responded with a reflexive benediction. ‘Can we use it as a weapon too?’

‘I’m not sure I follow,’ Moroe said, allowing a taint of confusion to contaminate his carefully modulated tones.

Samier, however, shared her warrior instincts, and nodded in instant understanding. ‘If it stabilised Governor Worden, it must have neutralised the virus in his system. What happens if the revenants get a dose?’

‘The animating virus in the brainstems should be eliminated, and the cadavers become inert,’ the magos said, as though explaining the obvious, which to him I suppose it was.

‘You can hardly walk up to a pack of revenants and stick a needle in their arms, though, can you?’ I asked sceptically.

‘That wouldn’t work,’ Moroe said, completely missing the sarcasm, as tech-priests so often did, given their penchant for taking everything literally. ‘Their hearts don’t beat, so the serum wouldn’t circulate round their systems.’

‘So we’re back to killing them the hard way again?’ Kasteen asked.

‘Perhaps not,’ Callister said. ‘If the contagion is indeed a manifestation of... the plague lord,’ at which point he hesitated, still clearly uncomfortable with referring to one of the Dark Gods even in oblique terms, ‘mere contact with the consecrated fluid may be enough to exorcise the Chaotic taint.’

‘Leaving the antibodies free to soak through the tissues, and eradicate the virus,’ Moroe added.



‘Then it sounds like we’re looking at spraying from the air,’ I said, approaching the hololith and scanning the topographical display eagerly in search of anything that looked like a military aerodrome. ‘Do the militia have any aircraft available?’

‘Four squadrons of Valkyries,’ Samier told me, without bothering to check any of the data-feeds. Since he’d been liaising with them for far longer than the rest of the expeditionary force, though, I was prepared to take his word for it without arguing. ‘Which, unfortunately, are of no use to us without pilots.’

‘There must be some left uninfected,’ I said, and the Tallarn colonel shook his head.

‘One of the earliest outbreaks hit the ADC<sup>31</sup> barracks,’ he said, looking chagrined. ‘We used aircraft extensively during our initial deployment.’ Thus making sure their crews were the first to come into contact with the virus, of course.

‘What about shuttles, then?’ I persisted. ‘There are plenty of ships in orbit we can requisition them from.’

‘Jona issued a planetary quarantine order, remember?’ Kasteen said, her frustration burning through the forced calm of her delivery. ‘None of them can land until it’s rescinded.’ Which we couldn’t do without revealing his condition to the entire planet.

‘Frakking great,’ I said, with feeling. ‘How else are we supposed to disperse the stuff?’ I turned, as a familiar odour wafted in my direction, to find, as I’d expected, my aide approaching. ‘Yes, Jurgen, what is it?’

‘Vox-message, sir,’ he replied, handing me a crumpled sheet of scrawled-on paper, which adhered unpleasantly to my fingertips as I took it. ‘From Major Divas. Wondering if you got his last one.’ He squinted at the note. ‘Sorry about the jam stains.’

‘That’s all right.’ I breathed deeply, remembering to use my mouth, and exhaled a calming breath, making use of the unexpected interruption to restore a measure of calm to my demeanour. After all, I had a reputation for keeping a cool head in a crisis to maintain, however unmerited it actually was. ‘Tell him much as I appreciate the invitation, I’m not really free for social engagements at the moment.’

‘Very good, sir,’ Jurgen said, and turned to leave, sidestepping the hololith on the way out. At which point my eye fell on the icon marking Divas’s artillery battery once more, and I called my aide back hastily, as a memory

of our time serving in that unit together suddenly surfaced.

‘Wait,’ I said, ‘forget that. Ask him if they’ve still got a stockpile of chemical munitions.’

‘Gas shells, got it,’ Jurgen replied, with a brief nod to confirm that he’d properly understood the message, before disappearing again in search of a vox.

‘I don’t see what good they’ll do,’ Kasteen said. ‘You can’t poison something that’s already dead.’

‘We won’t have to,’ I said. ‘The shells are set to airburst, to disperse the payload as widely as possible. If we substitute vaccine phials for the original load, one barrage ought to be enough to take out the largest concentration of revenants.’

‘That would work,’ Moroe agreed, after staring blankly into space for a moment. ‘Assuming the prevailing weather patterns hold, which seems approximately eighty-seven point three two four per cent probable over the next nineteen hours, falling to—’

‘Thank you, magos, that seems very reassuring,’ I cut in hastily.

‘We should take out enough to turn the tide, at least,’ Kasteen said, with rather more confidence than I felt. ‘After that, we can clear the city sector by sector.’

‘And then the other pockets of infection,’ Samier added. He was gazing at me with the faintly bovine expression of awestruck admiration I was more used to seeing on the faces of civilians at official receptions. ‘You truly walk in the footsteps of the Emperor, commissar.’

‘No more than we all do,’ I said, feeling a show of self-effacement would be best at this point. Sure enough, it had precisely the effect I’d anticipated.

‘Don’t be so modest, Ciaphas,’ Kasteen said. ‘If this works, you’ve just saved the planet.’

‘If,’ I said quietly, conscious, not for the first time, of how much could hang on so little a word.



*Editorial Note:*

*Not for the first time, I find myself wondering if the additional clarity afforded by the material presented here is worth the effort of reading; but in this case I must regrettably conclude that it is. Although Sulla's prose is as much an ordeal to wade through as ever, she does summarise the events of the wider campaign to which Cain, typically, gives short shrift.*

From *Like a Phoenix on the Wing: the Early Campaigns and Glorious Victories of the Valhallan 597th* by General Jenit Sulla (retired), 101.M42.

In those last desperate days we were hard pressed indeed; for, hard as we fought, and despite the advantages we possessed of greater speed, mobility and ranged firepower, these were matched by the countervailing advantage of our enemy, that of superior numbers. An advantage, in fact, which could only increase, since every one of us who fell was a potential recruit to the dire ranks of the walking dead: I soon lost count of the number of times I saw some shambling revenant sporting the uniform of one of our allied regiments, and began to dread the day when I was to behold the ravaged remains of some familiar visage from our own among them. How our gallant comrades in arms were able to bear the sight of the cadavers of those they'd fought alongside turned to so fell a purpose I could scarce imagine, but the toll taken on their morale must have been considerable, and I could only commend their fortitude and devotion to the Emperor.

As the number of revenants continued to rise, and of those defending

Viasalix continued to dwindle, a change began to come over the wandering packs of the unquiet dead. Whereas at first they had been relatively few in number, they began to coalesce into far larger groups, presenting a correspondingly greater threat to those who sought to confront them; so much so that, until the lesson was learned, a number of patrols were overwhelmed attempting to engage them at close quarters, erroneously trusting to the firepower of their weapons to preserve them from harm. After that, we began to keep the ranges open, and to keep squads close enough together to support one another.

Even this proved insufficient to fully prevail against their ever-increasing numbers, however, and with great reluctance we were forced to relinquish control of outlying areas, concentrating our forces in the centre of the city around the governor's palace. As if scenting victory, the hellish legions of the undead flocked inwards, surrounding the fortified precincts, and laying siege to Lentionia's greatest symbol of Imperial power.

Why things without reason should act in such a manner seemed baffling, all the more so since they had shown not the least sign of tactical acumen up to this point. The shocking reason for their change in behaviour was shortly to be discovered, however, and by none other than Commissar Cain, who, true to his quietly heroic nature, unhesitatingly sought out the most hazardous assignment for himself.



## NINE

If I'm honest, I was hoping for a relatively quiet life after that, basking in the kudos of having come up with the solution to our problem, while someone else got on with the job of implementing it. I didn't get one, of course; for some reason, it seemed, every revenant in the city chose that night to throw themselves against our defensive line, in a never-ending wave of shuffling carrion.

'I didn't know there were that many cadavers on the continent, never mind in Viasalix,' I said, viewing the tightly-packed streets beyond the perimeter walls by the light of the arc lamps mounted around them, which, in happier times, illuminated the front of the building for the aesthetic appreciation of passers-by during the hours of darkness. Now they'd been turned to cast their radiance farther out, across the streets and the dark expanse of the park beyond; a pale shimmer of reflected light deep within it marked the marble sides of the imposing sepulchre at the centre of the necropolis, through which Jurgen and I had passed so dramatically. Everywhere I looked there were more shuffling revenants, thronging the highways and packing the lawns and gardens of the park so deeply that the fringes of the pack faded into invisibility beyond the reach of the lights. 'There must be thousands of them.'

'There are always more dead than you think,' Broklaw said sardonically, sweeping his amplivisor across the throng. A muffled drumbeat of weapons discharging punctuated our conversation, as the troopers defending the palace precincts poured a constant stream of fire into the densely packed

meat below, while our other units harried their flanks. But it was like trying to flense a leviathan with teaspoons; however much damage we did, there were always more revenants to take the place of the fallen.

‘Something’s got ’em stirred up,’ my aide said, materialising unexpectedly at my shoulder, the usual harbinger of his approach having been masked by the stench of corruption rising from below. He handed me a message slip, this time mercifully unmarked by any traces of a snack. ‘Major Divas’s compliments, and they do have gas shells among the inventory.’

‘Well, that’s something,’ I said, as a party of troopers trotted across the courtyard below and began hosing down the cadavers beyond the railing with flamers. The smoke began to drift in our direction, and the smell abruptly became ten times worse. ‘He can deploy the vaccine as soon as the magos and the hierophant can create another batch.’

Callister and Moroe had left with Samier a few hours before, ahead of the revenants’ arrival, and with any luck would have begun their work by now behind a screen of Tallarn troops determined to keep the carrion off their backs; a job they were welcome to, so far as I was concerned. At least it didn’t look as though they’d have much interference to worry about; all the revenants on Lentonia seemed fixated on us, for some reason.

‘You really think we can hold this lot off for that long?’ Broklaw asked, his tone enough to tell me what answer he’d give to that question if prompted.

‘The Emperor protects,’ I said, as if I meant it, and fervently hoped that He would: because so far as I could see, the major was right. The flamer troopers below were already scuttling back into cover, their still burning victims being mashed against the barrier with a cracking of ribs audible even over the crackling of the flames as the wrought-iron railing bent visibly under the pressure of the press of uncountable bodies behind it. A few chips of rockcrete began to work loose from the footings, pattering like gravel against the cobbles, and I flinched involuntarily. At this rate we’d be overrun in a couple of hours.

Leaving Broklaw to his gloomy prognosis, I made the rounds of the jittery troopers, boosting morale as best I could with rote platitudes and the occasional bleak jest, but to a man and a woman they were spooked, and I couldn’t blame them. I was too, though I could hardly admit it, taking refuge in a pose of grim resolve which I found relatively easy to maintain. I concluded my peregrinations back at the operations centre, where Kasteen

greeted me bleakly.

‘It’s not looking good,’ she said, indicating the hololith.

‘No, it’s not,’ I agreed. I couldn’t say for sure that every revenant in the city was now besieging us, but it certainly seemed that way. There were certainly few, if any, contact icons elsewhere that I could see, the groups of them which had been drawn to the borders of the quarantine zones by the prospect of fresh meat having abandoned their battle of attrition against the dwindling Vostroyan defenders on the very brink of victory. ‘Any idea what’s attracting them here?’

‘Not a clue,’ Kasteen said, ‘unless it’s your magnetic personality.’

‘Hardly likely,’ I said. There were foes in the past which had sought me out, under the delusion that my reputation was merited, but they’d been in search of an honourable duel against a worthy opponent, and died disappointed on both counts. But they’d been sentient, even cultured in their own bizarre fashion, whether xenos or Chaos-touched, and these lumps of rotting meat animated by an unnatural virus weren’t even self-aware.

‘Whatever it is, it’s a big mistake on their part,’ Kasteen concluded, with more bravado than sober tactical analysis so far as I could see.

‘Let’s hope so,’ I said, enlarging the image of the area around the palace. The artillery battery was only a couple of kilometres away, but until Moroe got another batch of vaccine produced, and Callister blessed it, we’d get no help from there. We could always call in a conventional artillery strike on the densely-packed revenants, of course, but they were so close to us we were liable to take the brunt of the barrage ourselves if things went wrong, and we weren’t quite that desperate. Yet. Then, as the three-dimensional representation of the palace and its environs continued to expand, my eye fell on a crucial detail I’d so far missed. ‘What are these tunnels?’

Kasteen shrugged. ‘Just the usual, I suppose. Remnants of the undercity<sup>32</sup>, and a bolthole for the governor if things went wrong.’ (Which Jona’s predecessor had never had the chance to use, his assassins having rather unsportingly struck in the open air.)

‘Of course.’ I felt the palms of my hands begin to tingle, as a distinctly unwelcome idea insinuated itself. ‘They are properly sealed, aren’t they?’ The last thing we needed was to be outflanked by a mob of walking cadavers popping up from beneath our feet.

‘They are,’ Kasteen assured me, to my great and unspoken relief. She adjusted the display, bringing the tunnel system fully into view. ‘There’s an

old flood barrier here, and the sluices have been welded shut.’ She indicated another choke point. ‘That’s supposed to be an escape route, leading into the service tunnels, but the household guard had it bricked up during the insurgency, while they tried to work out which side to support.’

‘So long as it’s still holding,’ I said. It wasn’t likely that any of the revenants would work out how to use a spade or a pick, but I hadn’t lived that long by taking anything for granted. Then my innate affinity for tunnel systems kicked in, and with it a sudden realisation. ‘That service tunnel runs almost as far as the artillery park.’

‘So it does,’ Kasteen said speculatively, clearly having the same idea that I’d had. ‘And we’ve still got the phials of vaccine the hierophant blessed.’

Because we’d hoped to get our troopers immunised with all due dispatch, but, in the event, the mass attack by the revenants had left too little time to get that organised. She turned to me. ‘You’re our resident expert on tunnel fighting<sup>33</sup>. How quickly can you get through to the battery?’

‘That depends on how clear the tunnels are,’ I said, considering the matter. There was no telling what might be lurking in the lightless labyrinth, but I’d lay good odds it was a lot better than what currently had us surrounded. On the other hand, I didn’t want to seem too eager to make a run for it, while the rest of the regiment kept the revenants off my back. ‘But I’m not sure I should be the one to go. It sticks in my craw leaving the rest of you in the lurch, and I don’t mind admitting it.’ For a moment I wondered if I’d overplayed my hand, but Kasteen was already smiling ruefully.

‘I knew you’d say that. But no one else knows tunnels like you do. You’re our best hope.’ Her smile hardened. ‘In fact, you’re our only hope. If you don’t get through, we’ll be like the poor devils outside by the morning. If they’ve even left enough to get up again after they’ve finished feeding.’

‘No pressure, then,’ I jested feebly, trying not to think about it. We’d served together a long time by that point, and the notion of losing the closest thing I had to friends was a dispiriting one.

‘I’ll assign a squad to go with you,’ Kasteen said, which was a comfort; at least I’d have a demi-score of troopers to hide behind. Then I thought a little more about the implications, and shook my head with a pang of heartfelt regret.

‘I’ll just take Jurgen,’ I said. ‘We’ll move faster and more quietly alone.’ Not to mention the fact that if I wasn’t able to get through, and found it more prudent to run in the opposite direction, I’d be spared the necessity of



fabricating an excuse for the sudden change of plans.

‘You’re the expert,’ Kasteen said.

‘Yes,’ I agreed, rather wishing I wasn’t.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## TEN

Accessing the network of tunnels beneath the city turned out to be relatively straightforward, the entrance to the erstwhile governor's funk hole being hidden behind a butt of some local wine which the household troops who'd sealed the portal had apparently decided would be easier to shift if they drained it first, judging by the fruity aroma and the litter of broken goblets they'd left behind them when the job was done. By the time I'd collected the precious phials and stowed them carefully in a padded satchel which I slung from my shoulder so it rode behind my hip, mindful of the danger of fouling my laspistol should I need to draw it in a hurry, a group of our sappers had already smashed their way through the newly-cemented brickwork. They leaned on their crowbars as Jurgen and I stuck a cautious head apiece into the passageway beyond, which was smoothly finished in rendered rockcrete, no doubt so a fleeing aristocrat wouldn't get his robes mucky.

'Smells a bit,' my aide commented, as unconscious of the irony as always, and I nodded, filtering the ambient odour from the one beside me. A faint cloacal tang betrayed the proximity of a sewer, overlaid with traces of dust, mould and damp, and for a moment I felt quite nostalgic for the warrens of my childhood. Most significantly, however, the unmistakable stench of corrupted flesh was blessedly absent: if there were any revenants down here, they certainly weren't massing for an attack.

'Seems clear, though,' I said, and tapped the vox-bead in my ear. 'We're moving out.'

‘Emperor speed,’ Kasteen said, her voice attenuated by the tiny vox-receiver. ‘The Twelfth are expecting you.’

‘Tell Toren to get some tanna on,’ I said, with what I felt to be a transparent display of bravado. ‘We’ll probably need one when we arrive.’ I almost expected Divas himself to chime in at that point, with one of his usual fatuous remarks about wishing he was with us, but heard nothing on the 12th Field Artillery’s operational frequency apart from a faint hissing of static. Which was hardly surprising; the low-powered signals from a vox-bead wouldn’t punch through much of the intervening rock and soil.

‘I’ll do that,’ Kasteen promised, as we stepped through the ragged hole in the brickwork, and I turned back to the loitering sappers.

‘Seal it up,’ I said, despite my natural aversion to having my line of retreat cut off. They were going to anyway, so I might as well pretend it was my idea.

Not waiting for them to comply, because it would feel too much like being sealed into my own tomb, I led the way into the darkness, Jurgen trotting beside me. Luminators had been set into the ceiling during the tunnel’s construction<sup>34</sup>, but we refrained from kindling them, mindful of attracting attention. Instead, we followed the relatively faint cone of light cast by the lumina my aide had clipped to the bayonet lugs of his lasgun, which did the job more than adequately. I was also heartened to see the melta he favoured when expecting more trouble than usual slung across his back, where he could reach it easily if needed; a wise precaution, as things turned out.

After a hundred metres or so we reached the end of the new tunnel, and found ourselves facing a sheet metal door, somewhat incongruously bearing the cogwheel sigil of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Jurgen shouldered his lasgun, and reached for the melta.

‘Wait a moment,’ I said; an obstruction here simply didn’t make sense. If I was building a secret passage for the express purpose of running for my life along it, I wouldn’t want anything to hold me up, even for a second. I placed my fingertips against the cold steel surface, and pushed cautiously; sure enough a pressure latch clicked open, revealing a faint crack of darkness. ‘Douse the light.’ My aide complied, readying his lasgun again, and I pushed the panel all the way open, silently, on well-lubricated hinges.

As I’d expected, the floor on the other side was level with the surface we were standing on, tripping and falling flat on your face hardly being

conducive to an expeditious getaway, and I sidled out into the tunnel beyond, letting my other senses expand to fill the void left by the absence of light. The smell of the sewer was stronger here, which was hardly surprising, as it connected to the service tunnel we were now in by way of an access shaft a few hundred metres further along; as I strained my ears, I could just discern a faint, liquid trickling in that direction. Overlaid with it, and distorted by the echoes, rodents scuttered and chittered, alarmed by our intrusion, but, to my relief, I heard nothing like the shambling gait of a revenant.

‘All clear,’ I murmured, and Jurgen rekindled our light, sending the boldest of the local vermin, which had edged closer to investigate our unfamiliar sound and scent, scuttling for the refuge of the shadows.

‘Frakking disrespectful to the Omnissiah,’ my aide commented, as the doorway we’d entered the tunnel by swung closed, to reveal another Mechanicus sigil on the outer side, along with an age-browned prayer slip adhering to it with the aid of a dollop of sealing wax. It looked just like an access panel to some part of the city’s infrastructure, of interest only to a tech-priest assigned to minister to that particular system; and as none actually existed, no one would ever glance at it twice. ‘Asking for trouble, I reckon.’ A request which might well have been answered, given the fate of the man it had been constructed for.

Further conversation being superfluous, I led the way at a rapid trot in the direction of our destination, conscious that time was of the essence; if we delivered the vaccine too late to relieve our comrades, my reputation for inspiring improbable last-minute victories in the face of certain defeat would take an embarrassing knock. Besides, I liked Kasteen and the others, and had no desire to see them reduced to revenant fodder. After a few moments the smell of the sewer got considerably more pungent, and I noticed the access shaft off to our left: a floorless niche in the stained brick wall, into the depths of which a ladder descended. A faint sound rose from it too, which at first I attributed to fast-flowing water, but as I became more aware of the pattern of the echoes, it began to sound suspiciously like voices.

‘Is someone down there?’ Jurgen murmured, clearly having heard it too, and without waiting for orders he switched off his luminator again. I halted abruptly as we were plunged into darkness, and waited for my eyes to adjust. Sure enough, a faint glow was seeping up the shaft from beneath our

feet.

‘Looks like it,’ I replied, equally *sotto voce*. ‘But that’s not our concern at the moment. We need to get the vaccine delivered.’ Not to mention the fact that I had absolutely no inclination to go looking for even more trouble. We’d report it when we checked in at the 12th, and send a squad of storm troopers to check it out. Chances were it was just a gaggle of civilians who worked down here looking for somewhere to hide from the revenants, in any case.

‘Right you are, sir,’ Jurgen agreed, and snapped the light on again. Then pulled the trigger of his lasgun.

For which I could hardly blame him. A group of the motile cadavers were blocking the tunnel ahead, at least a dozen strong, shuffling towards us, their hands outstretched. I cursed, blaming myself for having become so fixated on the sounds drifting up from below that I’d missed the noise of their approach. Then the crackle of the lasgun firing a full burst drowned out everything else anyway.

‘There’s too many of ’em, sir,’ Jurgen told me, unnecessarily, as the leading revenant staggered under the blizzard of fire which was chewing its chest away. ‘I can’t get to the melta.’ Which was also depressingly obvious; the moment he stopped firing to switch weapons, the whole pack would surge forwards. If we turned and fled, we could outrun them easily, but our way back into the palace was now blocked; and if I failed to deliver the vaccine, I’d never live it down. The sewer, on the other hand, was running in more or less the right direction, and if we took to that, we stood a good chance of evading the cadavers without adding too much time to our journey.

‘Down the ladder!’ I shouted, hoping that the ghastly things couldn’t climb.

To think was to act, and I scrambled down the rusting rungs in a heartbeat, landing ankle deep in a slick of foetid water. I hadn’t paid much attention to the layout of the sewerage system, not anticipating a diversion through it, but my sense of direction proved as reliable as always, and I found it easy enough to visualise the way we needed to go. The light was stronger in that direction, enough of it leaking towards us to let me dodge hastily out of the way as Jurgen descended, with rather more speed than elegance<sup>35</sup>.

‘That’s shaken ’em off,’ my aide opined, as the revenants milled uncertainly around the aperture in the ceiling, apparently unable to

comprehend our sudden disappearance.

‘Unless any of them fall down the hole,’ I added, unwilling to wait and find out if chance and gravity would achieve what volition couldn’t. I began to lead the way towards the light in the distance. ‘Mind your feet,’ I added. ‘The main channel looks deep.’

The sewer itself was about three metres high, with a vaulted rockcrete ceiling, the noisome water flowing down it confined for the most part to a channel down the middle; on either side the floor was raised to just below the surface, enabling us to make relatively rapid progress despite the bow wave which sloshed over our boots each time either of us took a step. Jorgen hesitated a moment, switching his weapons while he had the chance, and waded after me, his melta charged and ready for trouble. Deprived of the light attached to his lasgun, I switched my own on, and briefly regretted it as I caught sight of the flotsam swirling around my feet.

We’d barely gone a hundred metres when a loud, echoing splash warned me that the inevitable had happened, and at least one of the cadavers had tumbled down the hatch after us. I glanced back, just in time to see another dim shape plummet into the stinking fluid beneath the hole, jostled in the wake of its fellow by the press of bodies above. Alerted by the sound, Jorgen swung round and discharged the melta, but whether he hit one of them I couldn’t say; the thermal backwash boiled the sewage around the target point, raising a cloud of rancid steam, which clawed at my throat and nasal passages, and left my eyes stinging.

‘Should have stuck with the lasgun,’ he said ruefully.

‘Just keep moving,’ I said, with an apprehensive glance at the artificial fog bank filling the sewer pipe. Within seconds it rolled over us completely, reducing visibility to a handful of metres and rendering our luminator useless, the light merely scattering back at us from the enveloping mist. I doused it, preferring to rely on the pattern of echoes to keep me close to the wall, and just hope that the shallows didn’t abruptly narrow, or disappear altogether. With our own light extinguished, the one in the distance pushed through the cloud of vapour in a fitful glimmer, which at least gave me something to aim for.

Hearing the irregular splashing of faltering footfalls somewhere in the murk behind us, I drew my weapons and picked up the pace as much as I dared. With the sounds muffled by the surrounding fog, there was no telling now how many of the revenants were behind us, although at least the worst

of it was beginning to clear. After a few more metres, the light I was aiming for began to shine more brightly, and I was able to pick out the dim shape of the lichen-slick wall beside me. The murmuring of voices was louder here too, and I strained my ears, grateful for the extra help it gave me in remaining orientated. I still couldn't make out any individual words, but there seemed to be several people conversing.

'Hadn't we better warn them?' Jurgen said.

'I suppose we should,' I agreed, as if the thought had occurred to me too, instead of the obvious one of just slipping past while the revenants were distracted with fresh prey. Then again, whoever was down here probably knew the tunnel system well enough to guide us to our destination more quickly than we could reach it by discovering an alternative route for ourselves. So thinking, I turned aside at the niche in the crumbling wall through which the light was shining, as decisively as if that had been my intention all along.

As I'd expected, the gap led to a metal door all but indistinguishable from the counterfeit one through which we'd entered the tunnel complex in the first place, except that this one stood ajar, allowing the light and the voices of the occupants to leak out into the sewer. I was about to push it open, when my aide jerked a disapproving thumb in its direction.

'Tech-priests aren't going to like that, either.'

'No, they aren't,' I agreed, pausing to look at the Mechanicus icon embossed on the door. It had been defaced, apparently by repeated hammer blows, but whether the vandalism had been deliberate or was simply a by-product of an attempt to force entry, I couldn't have said. Nevertheless, instead of flinging it open and striding through, as I'd intended, I widened the gap just enough to admit us, and stepped into the space beyond, my weapons ready.

It appeared to be a surge chamber, intended to accommodate a sudden increase in the water flow; a large, rectangular tank, with a steel mesh walkway running around it roughly two-thirds of the way up the wall. A ladder close to where Jurgen and I were standing gave access to the upper level, and, according to my instinctive affinity for environments like this, the metal door leading directly onto the catwalk probably opened straight into the tunnel from which we'd been forced to divert. All this, however, was peripheral to what we found inside.

It was harder to say who was the most startled, us or the room's occupants;

Jurgen and I, because we'd been anticipating a party of sewerjacks cowering down here until either the emergency was over or the revenants found them, or the nest of heretics we'd blundered into, because, in the manner of their kind, they were delusional enough to think they were clever and safe from discovery. Be that as it may, you can be sure Jurgen and I recovered first, probably because our lives were punctuated by such unpleasant surprises so frequently we were almost used to them.

'Intruders!' the nearest fellow howled, presumably in case the rest had failed to notice a couple of heavily armed men standing right in front of them. He was dressed in rags, and so caked with filth that he made Jurgen seem positively fragrant by comparison; and for a moment I found myself wondering if he and his fellows might be no more than harmless toshers after all. Then I noticed the inverted triangle of buboes suppurating in the very centre of his forehead, and all doubt was banished. I'd seen enough of the twisted works of Chaos by that point to recognise the mark of a willing worshipper of Nurgle, and struck out with my chainsword, decorating our immediate surroundings with the degenerate's entrails.

Which, I'm bound to say, could only improve them. The floor was covered in ordure, just a few centimetres deep where we were standing, but elsewhere heaped and moulded into drifts and mounds with some clear purpose behind them; repellent as the sight was, to say nothing of the stench, I felt a nagging sense of familiarity as I beheld it. I had no time to ponder its significance, however, as more of the madmen were running into the attack, slithering a little on the dung-slick floor, rusted blades and sharpened bones whirling in their hands. I downed one with a flurry of laspistol shots, and turned to parry the strike of another, whose flaking blade exploded in a shower of oxidised shards as it met the spinning teeth of my own. Before I could dispatch him, the vivid flare of Jurgen's melta discharging lit up the room, dazzling me as it so often did in a confined space, and the wretch slipped under my strike, taking advantage of my momentary disorientation to stab up between my ribs with the sliver of broken metal remaining to him. I evaded the clumsy thrust easily, taking his arm off at the elbow for his pains, and he collapsed, howling, while my aide cremated another of his brethren.

'Shut up,' I said, irritably, 'I can't hear myself think,' and silenced him with a swift kick to the throat which crushed his larynx, leaving him to thrash about for a few minutes until he expired from lack of breath.



‘Most impressive,’ a voice drawled, and the magister of the coven strode forwards to challenge us, with the lazy deliberation of a tarocchi player who thinks he holds all the Inquisitors. Despite a body so deformed with tumours and buboes he seemed less human in countenance than an ork, he moved with the easy grace of scarcely contained abhuman strength; one eye was swollen shut and weeping pus, while the other was bright and febrile. He barely gave the remains of his dismembered and vaporised acolytes a second glance as he picked his way through the heaps of filth with surprising fastidiousness, pausing to reposition a rotting fruit or a decomposing rat corpse here and there as he came. ‘But I wield our Grandfather’s gifts directly.’

‘And I wield a laspistol,’ I said, in no mood to bandy words with a madman, pulling the trigger as I spoke and putting a las-bolt through the middle of his head. A gout of corruption gushed from the site of the wound, and he staggered, a look of almost comical astonishment on his face, then, to my dismay, the diseased flesh began to flow back together, knitting seamlessly around a fresh, pus-leaking canker.

‘Another bloody wyrd,’ Jurgen muttered, bringing the melta to bear. ‘Why does it always have to be wyrds?’

‘It doesn’t always,’ I reminded him. ‘Sometimes it’s ’stealers, or necrons, or mutants, or... something.’

‘Every time we go down a hole,’ Jurgen persisted, with the distemperate tenacity he generally exhibited when he felt hard done by. ‘It ought to be against regulations.’

‘That was unforgivably rude,’ the heretic said, sounding as though I’d just committed some social *faux pas* at a cotillion he was hosting. He reached down and plucked a human skull, still decorated with scraps of rotting flesh, from one of the piles of filth in the middle of the room, and the reason for the nagging sense of familiarity I’d felt on entering suddenly snapped into place. The whole chamber was a three-dimensional map of the city, like the one in the hololith back in the operations room, but sculpted in ordure and waste instead of light. And the skull had been resting on the mound representing the governor’s palace. ‘I had been willing to let you share in the joys of Grandfather’s blessing, but you don’t deserve such an honour. So I’ll just bring a few of his pets here to tear you apart instead.’

‘Good luck with that,’ I said, the whole thing making sense at last. That must be why the walking dead had flocked to the palace; this lunatic had

found a way of directing them. Samier had told me he'd seen the same thing on Ferantis, although I hadn't expected to witness it for myself. 'You really think you can use one of the revenant heads to order them about?'

'And why not?' I could say that the light of insanity blazed up in his one good eye as he spoke, but it had actually been blazing pretty noticeably from the first moment we saw him. If you're going to sell your soul to the embodiment of physical corruption, and beg it to riddle you with disease, you're hardly playing cards with a full deck to begin with, if you ask me. 'Their resurrection is a gift of Nurgle, to his handful of faithful followers. After years of hiding our true allegiance from the lackeys of the corpse god, he has at last rewarded us by sending his blessing to our world.'

'I hate to burst your bubble,' I said, 'but it was pure chance the plague carriers ended up on Lentonia. They could have been reassigned anywhere. And I doubt there's a planet in the Imperium without a few deluded fools trying to suck up to the lord of the midden<sup>36</sup>. You're nothing special.'

'Special enough to commune with our ever-living brothers,' he retorted, clearly stung. 'And now this conversation is at an end.'

Warned by a sound behind me, I turned, to find the revenants which had followed us down the hole from the upper level entering the chamber. Both of them looked pretty much the worse for wear, particularly the one Jurgen had winged with his melta shot back in the sewer, which groped its way in with one arm reduced to a fused and smoking stump. I decapitated it with a single swipe of my chainsword, then turned to finish off its companion with a flurry of blows before it could get within arm's reach of me. Throughout the brief burst of action, my aide kept his melta pointed squarely at the wyrd in front of us.

'You were saying?' I asked sarcastically.

'Then it seems I must take care of you myself,' he said, with a faintly irritated snap. He opened his mouth impossibly wide, the jaws cracking audibly as they distended, and a torrent of foul-smelling vomit spewed towards Jurgen and I, far too much of it to have been contained in a single body. Where it touched the floor, or the piles of filth, everything dissolved with a sinister acidic hiss. I leapt instinctively behind my aide for cover, a good call as it turned out; the torrent of corruption parted around him, flowing harmlessly on either side, to leave us both standing unscathed.

'My turn,' Jurgen said, pulling the trigger of the melta, and obliterating the stupefied expression of the magister along with the rest of his face, head,

and upper torso. The twitching body fell into a tower of reeking corruption, intended to signify one of the inner hab-blocks if I remembered the streets in that quarter right, with a liquescent squelch, and flailed around blindly. Its hands twitched, grabbing handfuls of filth, with which it seemed to be trying to patch itself up. Jurgen took a couple of steps closer, and the thing's motion became more frantic and erratic. Then, as it came fully within his warpcraft-nullifying aura, it finally lay still. 'Regenerate this,' Jurgen said vengefully, and vaporised the rest of the body with a point-blank shot.

'Good man,' I said, feeling he deserved a pat on the back, and made for the ladder I'd first noticed on entering. The rungs were rusty, but seemed solid enough, and I scrambled up them as quickly as I could, eager to put as much distance as possible between myself and our nauseating surroundings.

As I'd anticipated, the door on the catwalk led us back out into the service corridor we'd been forced to divert from, and I cracked it open cautiously; or as cautiously as possible, given that both hinges and locking mechanism were thoroughly rusted, and it squealed like a bayoneted gretchin as I pulled it ajar. Given our surroundings, I had no olfactory warning of my aide's approach, and the groaning of the door drowned out his footfalls, so I must admit I jumped a little when he spoke.

'All clear, sir?' he asked, and I nodded cautiously, failing to hear anything immediately threatening.

'I think so,' I said, and followed him out into the tunnel, keeping my weapons handy nevertheless; after our little diversion, I wasn't planning to sheathe either of them until we reached the artillery park. Despite my apprehension, nothing made a grab for me in the darkness, and I kindled my luminator.

An action I instantly regretted. An agitated shuffling immediately began behind us, and, glancing back, I saw the revenant pack which had pursued us before still clustered around the shaft leading down to the sewers. Becoming aware of our presence, they began to shamble in our direction as quickly as they could; which, fortunately, was a good deal slower than either of us could manage.

'Come on!' I urged, breaking into a trot, despite the urge to move a lot more quickly than that. The faster we ran, the sooner we'd tire, and over the kind of distance we still had to go, exhaustion was going to be the real enemy. Slow the revenants might have been, but they had a definite edge in endurance, and once we began to falter they'd begin to close in again.

‘Right behind you, sir,’ Jurgen assured me, and we began our long, lonely run through the darkness. The going was reasonably good, with few obstructions, and the unsettling shuffling sound behind us quickly began to recede; but it never faded away entirely. In fact, after a while, it was beginning to grow perceptibly louder again, even over the rasping of the breath in my lungs. I risked a quick glance over my shoulder, and saw an unmistakable flicker of movement in the depths of the tunnel.

‘They’re catching up,’ I warned, and my aide turned, loosing off a couple of melta blasts into the gloom.

‘Not for long,’ he said, although truth to tell I doubted he’d have had much effect at that range, and picked up his pace a little. ‘What’s that?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, slowing down again. I could hear movement ahead of us as well, and gripped the hilt of my chainsword a little tighter. Then I caught sight of a glimmer of light too, far distant, and bobbing a little, as if it was moving fast. Given my last experience of unexpected lights down here, that wasn’t much of a comfort either. Just as I was beginning to feel distinctly spooked, a familiar voice echoed in my vox-bead.

‘Cai? Is that you? We can see a light up ahead.’

‘Toren?’ I asked in astonishment, trying not to let the sudden surge of relieved elation colour my voice too much. ‘What the hell are you doing down here?’

‘We got a little worried when we noticed you were overdue,’ Divas explained, a moment or two later, while the squad of storm troopers he’d brought with him hurried on past us to deal with the revenant pack; a job which, judging by the sudden eruption of lasgun fire, they took to with a will. ‘So I rounded up an escort and came to see what had happened to you.’ His expression suddenly changed as I took a couple of steps towards him. ‘Throne, Cai, you smell like you’ve been wading in—’

‘Long story,’ I interrupted, holding out the satchel; if I didn’t recall him to business quickly, I’d still be explaining while the last of the 597th were being ripped to shreds. ‘Are the shells ready?’

‘Payloads already removed, to take these,’ Divas assured me, accepting the bag a little cautiously, and keeping his fingers well clear of some prominent stains.

‘Good,’ I said, falling into step beside him. ‘Then there’s only one more thing I need to make sure of.’

‘Which is?’ Divas asked, with his usual expression of eager expectation.

‘Did Colonel Kasteen pass on the message about the tanna?’ I asked.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



*Editorial Note:*

*In the absence of any further comment from Cain about the matter, I feel obliged to insert the following. My apologies.*

From *Like a Phoenix on the Wing: the Early Campaigns and Glorious Victories of the Valhallan 597th* by General Jenit Sulla (retired), 101.M42.

Though pressed hard, our stout defence of the governor's palace, and of the Emperor's anointed representative housed within it, never faltered, wave after wave of the abominations of nature which besieged us being thrown back throughout the night. About an hour before dawn the atypical sense of purpose which had seized them, driving them ever and anon against our guns, seemed to leave them as inexplicably as it had first arrived; only later, when Commissar Cain returned, with a typically self-effacing account of his exploits in the tunnels beneath the city, did it become clear that this must have been the moment when he won his duel with the Chaotic sorcerer whose foul arts had goaded the carrion army against us. With their unholy master's control broken they reverted to being driven by instinct, many turning against others of their kind in their insensate feeding frenzy.

Shortly after dawn the barrage began, shells bursting in the air overhead to release the sanctified vaccine, which rained down on living and dead combatants alike. For my part, I must own, I breathed deeply, seeming to feel the very essence of the Emperor Himself being drawn into my lungs, and, at that moment, I felt as though no foe of Him on Earth, however powerful, could stand against me if I fought in His holy name.

Though the revenants battled on, the fight seemed to seep out of them, a lassitude of both will and limb gradually becoming apparent; until, at last, they sank to earth, as inert as all things without life should be, and the natural order returned at last to this troubled outpost of the Emperor's realm.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## ELEVEN

‘Well, that’s about it,’ I said, flinching involuntarily as one of the nearby Earthshakers lived up to its name. With the city all but cleared of revenants there was little need to keep firing off vaccine shells that I could see, but it kept the gunners out of mischief; and there may have been the odd pocket of infestation the clearance teams had missed, so another few rounds probably wouldn’t hurt. ‘All the infected Guardsmen have been purged, the rest vaccinated, and there seem to be enough militia survivors to maintain some semblance of order once we’ve gone.’ A job I didn’t envy them in the least. The capital had come off worst, but enough of the contagion had spread to other parts of the world to ensure that Lentonia wouldn’t be properly back on its feet for a couple of generations. Probably even longer, if Jona’s relatives got their collective arses back on the throne, now an appropriately heroic tale of his death in the front line of the defence of the palace had been discreetly nudged into circulation.

‘Thanks to you,’ Divas said, a trifle indistinctly. With the crisis past, I’d found the time to take him up on his invitation to get together for a meal and a drink, and a chat about old times, most of which he seemed to remember a great deal more fondly than I did; but then he’d been lobbing shells at a far distant enemy, for the most part, while I’d been a lot closer to them, and generally fleeing in terror.

‘Thanks to us,’ I corrected. ‘If you hadn’t come looking for Jurgan and I, it could all have turned out very differently.’

‘Now you’re just being modest,’ Divas said, which was only partially true;



given some of the perils my aide and I had faced together over the years and survived, we might well have fought off the revenant pack, but the time we'd have lost in doing so could easily have cost the 597th their lives. His intervention had been decisive, from where I was sitting. But if he wanted to hand me all the credit, I'd be happy to take it.

'Makes two of us, then,' I said, pretending reluctance, and pushed my empty plate aside. 'Heard where you're going next?'

'Coronus,' Divas said. 'On the *Word Eternal*.'

I pricked up my ears at the name of the troopship. 'Us too,' I said, smiling broadly, as I picked up my goblet of amasec. 'So it sounds as though I'll be having the pleasure of your company for a while longer than we thought.'

Divas was a terrible tarocchi player, with a tendency to bet far more heavily than his hand justified; and if that didn't amount to a pat on the back from the Emperor for a job well done, I don't know what did.

[On which uncharacteristically pious note, this fragment of the Cain archive meanders to an end.]



## NOTES

1. The typically Valhallan fur caps, like the greatcoats Cain has already alluded to, generally being donned only in sub-zero temperatures.

2. When Cain joined what was to become the 597th, in 931.M41, the two former regiments making it up were practically at one another's throats; typically, his account of that period of his career glosses over the credit that he undoubtedly deserves for welding them into an effective fighting unit, concentrating instead on what he perceives as his self-interested motives for doing so.

3. Like many seasoned warp travellers, Cain tended to use the term 'Arbites' colloquially to refer to local law enforcers as well as actual members of the Adeptus Arbites; which, given the bewildering variety of nomenclature on different worlds, he can hardly be blamed for. Where actual members of the Adeptus are present, however, he is usually punctilious about the distinction: since he doesn't mention any Arbitrators in the course of his narrative, it seems safe to assume that the handful one would normally expect to find on a populous Imperial world were either too busy to socialise or had been killed in the fighting.

4. And because the CO and second-in-command of an Imperial Guard regiment would never travel in the same shuttle, to ensure accident or enemy action would be unable to cripple it by their simultaneous loss.

5. Wives and husbands, if the rumours are true, but not the livestock. Probably.

6. A well-regarded local printsheet.

7. A colloquial contraction of 'Basilica Concilium,' the meeting place of the governor's advisory council, and de facto seat of government.

8. The real target being the local Arbitrator, who'd sent his car for Cain as a courtesy.

9. The very reason Cain had had for contriving his assignment to them at the beginning of his career.

10. Not quite that many, though several were certainly present.

11. And everyone else's; contrary to Cain's usual opinion, not everything was about him.

12. Kasteen's given name.

13. So distinctive a fashion that they almost constitute part of their uniform; indeed, it has been suggested, not entirely facetiously, that the size and degree of grooming are at least as reliable a signifier of status as the official insignia of rank.

14. More likely it was simply air or the gases of decomposition passing over the vocal cords.

15. Highly unlikely, as revenants generally act purely on instinct.

16. Not entirely true, as the world was still technically under martial law, and he could have been overruled at any time; but the population were more likely to listen to edicts issued in the governor's name, and the Imperial Guard more than had its hands full.

17. A mildly disparaging term for engineers, and by extension tech-priests in general, often used among the Imperial Guard.

18. Where Cain became so familiar with Tallarn custom isn't clear, although some portion of the Archive yet to be edited may throw some light on the matter.

19. Regimental headquarters.

20. Since commissars are outside the chain of command, troopers aren't technically obliged to salute them, although a substantial minority do so anyway; probably from a sense of prudence for the most part, although in Cain's case it generally seems to have been motivated by genuine respect.

21. Jona's predecessor as governor having been far too unpopular to be granted any posthumous honours.

22. The scions of local noble houses, for the most part, of insufficient status to be accorded the privilege of eternal rest directly alongside Lentonian's ruling dynasty, and those rising merchant families wealthy enough to pay back a lifetime of snubs from their self-ascribed 'betters' by defiantly crashing their final party.

23. A gesture in which the thumb is pressed into the palm of the hand, so the fingers resemble an aquila wing, intended to ward off misfortune or invoke good luck, common on many worlds in the Damocles Gulf and adjacent sectors.

24. Presumably her helmet had been removed in his presence, though he didn't bother to mention the fact.

25. It's unclear here whether he means two squads in particular, or enough troopers in total to make up that many units.

26. In fact all the regimental commanders were attending the meeting, but the others were so depleted by this point that only the Valhallans and Tallarns were able to assign soldiers to actively hunt the revenant packs instead of simply holding the ground they occupied.

27. Cain may be being a little more cynical about Callister's motives here than is warranted: as the Emperor's anointed representative on Lentonian, the governor's position was of spiritual as well as temporal significance, and the hierophant may well have felt it his duty to remain and offer prayers to ease his passing.

28. Lentonian had a slightly longer day than Terran Standard.

29. Which would be all of them: don't pretend you wouldn't be tempted to poach him given the chance.

30. Given the exceptional piety of Tallarns in general, and their Imperial Guard officers in particular, it's quite likely that Samier was eager to consult the hierophant privately in the hope of some extra spiritual guidance.

31. Air Defence Corps.

32. Given the age of most Imperial cities, which are measured in millennia, it's hardly surprising that the ground beneath them is almost invariably riddled with the built-over remains of generations of previous settlement, forming a honeycomb of forgotten cellars, service tunnels and the like.

33. A legacy of his early life in an underhive.

34. Or renovation: such subterranean passages generally having

*been in place for centuries.*

*35. It's unclear here whether that last comment applies to Jurgen or Cain himself; although, under the circumstances, I doubt that either was eager to hang about.*

*36. Not quite true. I doubt there are any Chaos cults on Terra or Mars, for instance, and followers of the Dark Gods tend to be thin on the ground on Space Marine Chapter worlds.*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# THE SMALLEST DETAIL

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



Jurgen had never liked people very much, and their returned indifference was fine by him. That was the main reason he'd joined the Imperial Guard: they told you what to do and you got on and did it, without any of the social niceties of civilian life he found both tedious and baffling. Since becoming a commissar's personal aide, however, he'd been forced to interact with others in ways which went far beyond the simple exchange of orders and acknowledgement, although he remained obstinately wedded to the most straightforward approach in dealing with them.

'What do you want?' the sergeant in the blue and yellow uniform of the local militia asked, looking warily at him from behind the flakboard counter walling off most of the warehouse-sized room. 'The Guard have their own stores.'

Jurgen nodded, unable to argue with that, having already worked his way through the inventories of every Imperial Guard supply depot close to the commissar's quarters. He didn't suppose there would be much here worth his attention, but you never knew, and it was a point of personal pride to know where he could lay his hands on anything Commissar Cain might feel the lack of at a moment's notice.

'Dunno yet,' he said, choosing just to answer the question, and ignore the statement of the obvious which had followed it. 'What have you got? And I'm not here for the Guard.' He readjusted the shoulder strap of his lasgun, so he could rummage in a pocket without the weapon slipping to the floor. After a moment he extricated a grubby sheet of vellum, embellished with a

seal, and leaned across the counter to bring it within the sergeant's field of vision. The man stepped back hastily, as people so often did when faced with clear evidence of Jurgen's borrowed authority from close at hand.

*'The bearer of this note, Gunner Feric Jurgen, is my personal aide, and is to be accorded all such assistance as he may require in the furtherance of his duties.'*

*Commissar Ciaphas Cain.'*

'You're with the Commissariat?' the sergeant asked, a nervous edge entering his voice, and Jurgen nodded. It was a bit more complicated than that, he was technically still on secondment from a Valhallan artillery regiment he never expected to see again, but he'd never bothered to find out precisely where he now fitted into the inconceivably complex structure of the Imperial military. No one else seemed to know either, and he found the ambiguity worked to his advantage more often than not.

'I work for Commissar Cain,' he said, keeping it simple, folding his well-worn credentials and returning them to the depths of his pockets as he spoke.

'So I see.' Sergeant Merser forced an ingratiating smile towards his face. Though he outranked this evil-smelling interloper, he'd long since learned that his status in the planetary militia didn't mean a thing to most Guardsmen; they regarded all locally raised units as little more than a civilian militia barely worth acknowledging, let alone according any sign of respect. Besides, this particular Guardsman appeared to be running an errand for a commissar, one of those mysterious and terrifying figures seldom encountered by lowly militia troopers, and a good thing too if even half the stories he'd heard about them were true. Not just any commissar either, but Cain, the Hero of Perlia, who even now was giving the rebel forces infesting the city the fight of their lives. However unwelcome his visitor may have been, it was probably best to appear co-operative, at least until it became clear what he wanted.

Jurgen leaned on the counter, and raised his gaze to the racks of neatly shelved foodstuffs in the cavernous space beyond. 'Can't see a lot from out here,' he said.

'No, of course not. Come on through.' Reluctantly, the sergeant lifted a hinged flap in the boardsheet countertop, enabling him to tug open a



sagging gate of the same material beneath it. Jurgen ambled through the gap, making a mental note of the man's name at the top of the duty roster tacked to the wall as he passed. Even the most trivial detail could turn out to be important, the commissar always said, and Jurgen had taken the precept to heart, squirreling away whatever nuggets of information he could find as assiduously as pieces of unattended food or kit. You never knew when something you stumbled across might come in handy.

'Got an inventory?' he asked, and Sergeant Merseer nodded reluctantly.

'It's around here somewhere,' he said, making a show of rummaging through the shelves under the counter. After a moment or two of Jurgen's patient scrutiny it became obvious there was no point in attempting to stall any further, and he hauled out a venerable-looking book, leather-bound and battered, trying to hide his annoyance. 'I think you'll find everything's in order.'

Jurgen said nothing as he took it, but his scepticism was palpable, hanging around him like the peculiar odour which had accompanied him into the stores. Merseer found himself edging away from his unwelcome visitor, unsure of which he found the more unsettling.

'I'll get on, then,' Jurgen said, dismissing the sergeant from his mind as thoroughly as if the militiaman had evaporated.

Merseer watched, as the Guardsman worked his way methodically along the storage racks, periodically pausing while he leafed through the pages of the venerable tome. Now and again he glanced in Merseer's direction, with an expression of patient inquiry.

'Some local thing?' he asked, as a sliver of dried meat disappeared through the hole in his beard, accompanied by the squelching sounds of mastication.

Merseer nodded. 'Sand eel. From the Parch. Only things that can live out in the open down there, so the locals raise them for food.' Aware that he was beginning to babble, he clamped his mouth firmly shut. The less he said, the less could find its way back to the commissar's ears.

'Had worse,' Jurgen conceded, slipping a couple of packs of the leathery shreds into one of the pouches hanging from his torso armour. There had been none of that in the Guard stores, and Commissar Cain generally appreciated the chance to try new flavours. Come to that, they were both seasoned enough campaigners to find the idea of emergency rations which tasted of anything identifiable at all a pleasant novelty.

By the time Jurgen had finished working his way round the shelves, the

pouch was considerably fuller than it had been, stuffed with other local viands which the offworld-supplied Guard stores had been without. There was little enough else to like about Helengon, a world which, in his opinion, was aptly named. He'd seen worse, of course, and at least the heretics they were fighting here were human enough instead of gleaming metal killers or scuttling tyrannid horrors, but like most of the places he'd been since enlisting, the air was too warm and dry, and the ground too firm underfoot.

'Anything else I can help you with?' Sergeant Merser asked, and, reminded of his presence, Jurgen shook his head.

'Got what I came for,' he said, passing the book back.

'I see.' If the sergeant's voice trembled just a little, or his face seemed a trifle more ashen than it had been, Jurgen didn't notice: but then he seldom noticed things like that anyway.

One kind of subtle cue Jurgen was pretty much guaranteed to pick up on, though, was intimations of danger. By this point in his life he'd been on the receiving end of enough ambushes, berserker charges, and incoming fire to have taken it pretty much for granted that if something wasn't trying to kill him now it was only a matter of time before it did. Accordingly, it didn't take him long to realise he was being followed.

He glanced around, tugging gently on the sling of his lasgun, to bring it within easy reach of his hand without appearing to ready himself for combat. Sure enough, a faint scuffle echoed in the shadows behind him, as someone took a half-step too many before realising their quarry had become stationary, and froze into immobility in their turn.

Jurgen felt his mouth twitch into an involuntary sneer. Typical militia sloppiness, he thought. Not a bad place for a bushwhacking though, he had to give them that. He'd cut down an alleyway between two of the big storage units, which, from the signage stencilled on the ends, he'd deduced contained small-arms and ammunition, neither of which made them worth a visit. Those he could obtain directly from the Guard if he wanted them. Besides, most of the las weapons around here were of local manufacture, adequate, but no match for the products of an Imperial forge world; he had no desire to find a power pack shorting out on him just when he needed it the most.

Which could be any time now. Seeing no point in letting his followers know he was on to them, and needing a plausible reason for his sudden

stop, Jurgen unsealed his trousers, and relieved himself against the nearest wall in a leisurely fashion. While he did so, he let his gaze travel around his immediate surroundings, as though simply passing the time until nature had run its course.

There were two men trailing him, trying to make themselves invisible behind a stack of corroding metal drums. They'd almost succeeded, but not well enough to escape the notice of a combat veteran of Jurgen's calibre. A faint clank of metal against metal meant that at least one of them was probably armed.

In the other direction, a jumble of crates narrowed the gap between buildings; a soldier in blue and yellow was lounging casually against one, puffing on a lho stick, and apparently keeping an eye out for his immediate superior; a performance which would have been a little more convincing if his head had spent more time turned in the direction of the alley mouth than towards Jurgen.

Completing his task with a sigh of satisfaction, Jurgen rearranged his clothing and his dignity, and resumed his unhurried progress towards the smoking trooper. As he'd expected, the soft padding of stealthy footsteps followed him. Only one pair, though, by the sound of it. That meant the other man would be lining up a weapon of some kind. His opinion of the Helengon militia plummeted even further, if that were possible; the gunman would be as much of a danger to his confederates as to Jurgen. More of one, even: Jurgen had a helmet and flak vest for protection, while the troopers stalking him were dressed simply in fatigues.

It never occurred to Jurgen to wonder why these men appeared to be after him; they just were. Reasons were irrelevant.

As he passed the smoker, the man attacked, lunging with the combat knife he hadn't quite managed to conceal behind his body while leaning against the crates. Either he knew what he was doing, aiming a single, precise blow at one of the vulnerable points in Jurgen's body armour, or he was an idiot, striking out blindly in the vague hope of finding an opening. Whichever it was, he was out of luck; Jurgen pulled the lasgun off his shoulder, ramming the barrel into the side of the man's arm, and deflecting his aim with a *snap* of shattering bone. The blade skittered off the tight carbifibre weave of his flak vest, and Jurgen pulled the trigger, putting a couple of rounds through the smoker's chest before he even had time to finish inhaling in preparation for an agonised scream. One down.

Jurgen turned, seeing the man behind him pick up the pace, hoping to close the distance between them before he could bring the lasgun round to bear. He was a slight fellow, whose uniform hung oddly on him, as though it was a little too large for its wearer; which might have struck Jurgen as odd, if he hadn't spent most of his life being issued with kit which didn't quite fit. Imperial Guard uniforms only came in two sizes, too large and too small, a problem most troopers solved by swapping what they'd been given with others in their unit; an option Jurgen had never felt inclined to pursue.

The running man was carrying a weapon in his hand, a crude stubber, which he brought up and fired as he came. Jurgen didn't flinch; the chances of hitting a man-sized target with a handgun while firing on the run were minimal, he knew, and his flak vest would probably hold even if the fellow got lucky.

Which he didn't. A burst of lasgun fire from a stationary shooter, on the other hand, was a lot more accurate, especially if the shooter in question had spent years bringing down moving targets in the middle of a firefight.

Stubber man folded and fell, his torso pitted with the ugly cauterised wounds characteristic of lasgun fire, his pistol skittering away as his flaccid hand smacked against the ground. He was probably dead before he hit the ground, but Jurgen put an extra round through his head anyway. He'd seen enough people keep going on the battlefield by sheer willpower, long after they should have laid down and died, insulated by shock and a final adrenaline surge from the full effect of their mortal wounds.

As Jurgen ran forward, angling for a clear shot at the man behind the barrels, his boot kicked against the fallen gun, and he glanced down at it disdainfully. It was an old-fashioned slug thrower, crudely made, and clearly not standard issue, even to the militia of a backwater world like this one. No wonder its owner had missed him; it was beyond Jurgen why anybody would choose to use a weapon like that, instead of the lasgun he'd been issued with.

The man behind the barrels had no such compunction, it seemed, a hail of las-bolts chewing up the rockcrete footings of the storage blocks, gouging a line of splinters across the crates and the knifeman's corpse behind Jurgen as he returned fire on full auto. That would deplete the power pack uncomfortably fast, he knew, but there was no cover he could take, and throwing himself flat to minimise his target profile would simply allow the hidden gunman to pick off an immobile target at his leisure. Better to

advance behind a blizzard of suppressive fire, hoping that would be enough to keep his quarry's head down, until he was able to get a clean shot at him.

The tactic worked better than Jurgen had dared to hope. The hail of las-bolts threw up sparks from the metal drums, punching dents and ripping holes in them with a clamour which would have struck terror into the heart of an ork. It certainly terrified the hidden gunman, who stopped firing to retreat behind the metal cylinders' meagre protection, huddling in their lee.

Not that it did him much good. Liquid began seeping from the punctured drums almost at once, the thick, acrid smell of promethium lacing the air around them. As Jurgen continued to advance, firing as he came, either a spark from an impact or the heat of a las-bolt itself ignited the escaping vapour.

With a muffled *whump*, the whole stack exploded, making Jurgen stagger with the sudden wave of heat. He backed up fast as a lake of burning fuel began sloshing in his direction, scrambling over the crates which were already beginning to blacken in the intense heat, just as the blazing tide began to lap against them. From somewhere in the middle of the inferno, he thought he could hear a prolonged, agonised scream, which was mercifully cut short in a sudden secondary explosion.

Choking from the smoke, eyes streaming from the acrid fumes, Jurgen stumbled into the open, gasping for breath. A thick, dense coil of smoke followed him like a questing tentacle, but he ignored it, sweeping his immediate surroundings for any further signs of hostility. Attracted by the noise, a score or more of the local militia were running towards him, some carrying fire suppressors, others with weapons ready, no doubt under the impression that the rebels were attacking.

'You! Guardsman. Drop your weapon!' someone shouted, and Jurgen turned, prepared to fight his way out if he had to; but this time it wasn't an option. Five troopers had their lasguns trained on him, and it was clear that these ones knew what they were doing. They were too widely dispersed to take down; if he tried, he'd only be able to get a couple of them before the others returned the favour. They were dressed differently from the others too, in body armour and full face helmets, unit insignia which meant nothing to him stencilled on their chestplates.

He knew what they were, anyway, he'd seen plenty like them in his time in the Guard. Provosts, or whatever they called themselves in the Helengon militia.

‘Can’t do that,’ he replied evenly. ‘It’s against regulations.’ Imperial Guard troopers were responsible for their lasgun at all times, and although simply putting it down wouldn’t be a technical breach of standing orders, the next step would most likely be someone taking it out of his reach altogether. Even an ordinary Guardsman would find the threat of being disarmed well nigh intolerable, but for a commissar’s personal aide, it would be a mortal wound to his dignity. On the other hand, being shot five times at close range wouldn’t do a lot for it either. ‘But I’ll take out the power pack and stow it.’

‘Good enough,’ the squad leader agreed, after a moment’s hesitation. She raised her visor to look at him directly, then back to the column of smoke still billowing from between the warehouses. ‘Then you and I are going to have a little chat.’

‘You’ve got no idea which unit they were from?’ the provost sergeant, whose name had turned out to be Liana, asked, not for the first time.

Jurgen shook his head. ‘Never saw any patches,’ he repeated, and shrugged. ‘Probably wouldn’t have recognised ’em if I had.’

‘Probably not,’ Liana agreed. ‘But they should have had something.’ She gestured at the bustle of activity surrounding them. By now, over a hundred militia troopers had arrived to fight the fire, clear up its aftermath, and, in many cases, simply take advantage of the free entertainment. Every single one of them had insignia of some kind visible on their uniforms.

‘These ones didn’t,’ Jurgen insisted, mildly irked at having his word doubted. The commissar would have believed him at once. He glared balefully at the charred cadaver being carried past by a group of troopers who must have seriously annoyed a superior to be landed with that particular duty, and spat vehemently, to relieve his feelings. ‘Not that you could tell from that.’

‘Special forces, maybe?’ Liana speculated, at least willing to entertain the idea that he might not have been mistaken.

‘They’d have had better equipment than a backstreet stubber,’ Jurgen said, ‘and they’d have been better shots.’

‘Good point,’ the provost conceded, to Jurgen’s faint, and pleased, surprise. She turned to Sergeant Merser, who was hovering uneasily nearby, a data-slate in his hand. ‘Any luck tracing the lasgun one of them was armed with?’

Merser nodded, looking distinctly unhappy. ‘We managed to find a serial

number. I would have thought the metal had melted, but the body...' he swallowed, turning another shade paler, 'what was left of it, had fallen on top. Protected it a bit.'

'So who was it issued to?' Liana asked.

'That's just it. It wasn't.' Merser held the data-slate out, as though he expected it to snap at his fingers. 'It's listed as still in stores.'

'So it was pilfered,' Liana said, and Merser nodded unhappily.

'Looks that way,' he replied.

'Then we need to know who by,' Liana persisted.

'If we find out what's missing, we should be able to deduce who's responsible,' Merser said. 'I'll start going through the inventories.'

'We could start with yours,' Liana suggested, fixing the heavysset sergeant with a calculating look.

Merser flushed indignantly. 'My records are fine,' he snapped. 'What's in the files is on the shelves.' He looked at Jurgen for confirmation. 'He'll tell you.'

Jurgen nodded. 'Everything matched,' he agreed. He jerked a thumb in the direction of the latest corpse to be recovered, being dragged along in a tarpaulin by sweating, swearing troopers, leaving a faint trail of ash and flakes of charred meat in their wake. 'And I'd have a roll call if I were you. Whoever's missing's probably them.'

'Good idea,' Liana concurred. 'Then we can start chasing down their contacts. Wouldn't be the first time a quartermaster started diverting stuff to the black market.'

'I'll leave you to it, then.' Jurgen shouldered his lasgun, and turned away. 'I'm done here.'

'Maybe you should stay,' Merser said hastily.

Jurgen turned back, surprised. 'What for?' he asked.

'Yes, what for?' Liana turned a questioning gaze on the portly sergeant. 'It's not as though Gunner Jurgen's a suspect.'

'Of course not,' Merser said hastily. 'But he must have assisted the commissar in his investigations. Maybe he can spot something we might overlook.'

'Maybe he can,' Liana agreed, after a moment's consideration. She turned to Jurgen. 'Do you think you might?'

'Dunno.' Jurgen shrugged. 'Worth a try, I suppose, so long as it don't take too long' In truth, his involvement in investigations generally went no

further than processing the paperwork and shooting the occasional traitor who resented his unmasking, but an appeal had been made to his sense of duty, and he felt honour-bound to respond. It was what Commissar Cain would wish, he had no doubt.

‘Right then,’ Liana said, looking from one man to another, and wondering if she’d just made the decision to consign her career to oblivion, ‘might as well get started, I suppose.’

‘What do you mean there’s no one missing?’ Liana asked, handing the data-slate she’d just been shown back to the provost who’d brought it in to her office; a small cubicle on the western side of the militia barracks, which would have seemed crowded with only one occupant. Currently it had three, Jurgen observing from a corner near the window, which Liana seemed to like jammed open as wide as it would go. He had no objection to this, as it gave him a good view of the militia compound, and the city beyond, from which the occasional crackle of small-arms fire could be heard. The rebels were making a concerted attempt to hold on to the southern quarter, with the Imperial Guard equally determined to dislodge them, and show the militia how it ought to be done by breaking the year-long stalemate in a matter of days.

‘I mean everyone’s accounted for, ma’am,’ the provost said, and withdrew, a little hastily it seemed to Jurgen.

‘Someone’s playing games,’ Jurgen said. ‘Answering twice to cover for them.’ A common enough dodge in the Guard, when troopers had overstayed a pass, or been too hungover to report for duty.

‘Unless the men who attacked you weren’t soldiers at all,’ Liana said thoughtfully.

‘They were in uniform,’ Jurgen objected.

‘I went to a party dressed as an ork once,’ Liana retorted. ‘That didn’t make me a greenskin.’

Jurgen nodded, the way he’d seen the commissar do while considering an unexpected suggestion, and tried to see what she was driving at. ‘You mean they were pretending to be militia troopers,’ he said at last, reasonably certain he got it.

‘That’s right,’ Liana said, looking at him a little oddly. ‘Using stolen uniforms to get onto the base.’

Which sounded reasonable to Jurgen. If they could steal guns, they could



steal uniforms just as easily. 'If it was me,' he added, 'I'd have set charges in the armoury as soon as I'd finished helping myself.'

'First thing we checked, believe me,' Liana assured him. 'Nothing there.'

'Hm.' Mindful that he was a guest in her office, Jurgen spat out of the window, rather than letting the gob of saliva land where it would. 'Even the rebels here aren't up to much.'

If Liana realised that was a thinly-veiled criticism of the local forces, she was tactful enough to let it go. Instead, she looked thoughtful. 'You're right,' she said. 'If rebels could sneak in and steal weapons, they'd definitely have sabotaged what was left so we couldn't use them.'

Jurgen's brow furrowed. 'Who does that leave?' he asked.

'Gangers, I suppose,' Liana said. 'Plenty of those around, carving up territories for themselves while the fighting keeps us too busy to rein them in.' She looked up, as Merser entered the office. 'Any luck?'

'I can tell you the records are a mess,' Merser said. 'Overstocks, items missing, half the inventories read like fiction 'zines.'

'No change there, then,' Jurgen said, shrugging. 'Yours are the only ones I ever saw that tallied exactly.'

Merser flushed. 'I like to pay attention to the details.'

'I noticed,' Jurgen said. He glanced at his chronograph, and stood. 'I need to get back. Anything I can help with, contact the commissar's office.'

'Of course.' Liana stood too, began to hold out a hand, then withdrew it hastily. 'We'll keep you informed.'

'Of course we will,' Merser added, standing aside to make room at the door. 'Where's your vehicle?'

'Came on foot,' Jurgen lied, and left them to it.

In fact he'd commandeered a motorcycle, which someone had been careless enough to leave unattended in the regimental motor pool, the better to navigate his way around the warren of streets surrounding the Imperial Guard deployment zones. He'd have preferred a Salamander, but he'd have had to divert around so much rubble if he'd chosen one that it would have all but doubled the distance he would have to travel.

After retrieving his mechanical steed, he coasted into the lee of a battle-damaged Chimera, which a party of engineers were energetically reconsecrating, and waited a few moments.

As he'd expected, the distinctive figure of Sergeant Merser emerged from

the building almost at once, at the closest to a trot he could manage. The heavysset non-com swung himself into the cab of a parked truck, against which a soldier with no visible unit patch had been lounging, and gunned the engine, while his companion scrambled up beside him. No sooner were they both aboard than Merser slammed the lorry into gear, roaring out of the yard as though half the daemons of the warp were after him.

It was almost too easy. After a quick conversation over his vox-bead, Jurgen opened the bike's throttle, and set out in pursuit. He hung well back, keeping the luminator off, despite the rapidly gathering night, well able to judge the presence of any major obstacles in the carriageway by the intermittent flaring of his quarry's brake lights. The risk of being spotted was minimal, he knew. Merser's attention would be entirely on the road ahead, looking for a solitary pedestrian.

Before long, the lorry coasted to a halt at an intersection, where Merser paused, glancing up and down the converging carriageways. Nothing moved in either direction, except a Chimera patrolling the deserted streets. With nightfall came the curfew, and nothing would be moving now except military traffic. Nothing legal, anyway, but there was nothing to worry about. No one would look twice at a militia truck.

'Where is he?' his companion demanded, nursing a laspistol the armourer still hadn't noticed was missing. 'You said he was on foot.'

'He can't have got far,' Merser said, still hovering indecisively. If he picked the wrong direction, the Guardsman would be safely back in the Imperial Guard compound, reporting to the commissar before they could double back and correct their mistake. Before he could make up his mind which road to take, a motorcycle roared up out of the darkness behind them, and parked, its engine revving, next to the cab.

Merser glanced down, and found himself staring along the length of a lasgun barrel, with a well-remembered face at the opposite end.

'I thought you'd leg it,' Jurgen remarked, conversationally. 'But I wanted to be sure. The commissar always likes to be sure, before he accuses anyone.'

'Accuses them of what?' Merser blustered, playing for time.

'Trying to kill me, for starters,' Jurgen said, as though that had been a perfectly reasonable thing to attempt. 'You sent those frakkers after me, didn't you?'

By way of an answer, Merser floored the accelerator. Jorgen debated pursuit for a fraction of a second, then squeezed the trigger of his lasgun instead. There was no way the cumbersome truck would be able to outrun the motorcycle anyway, so he might as well bring things to an end now. The hail of las-bolts shredded the lorry's tyres, and he watched it veer off course and collide with a half-collapsed storefront with detached interest.

As it came to rest, amid a small landslide of displaced brick, the passenger door popped open, and the ersatz soldier bailed out, firing wildly as he came. He was no better a shot than his deceased companions, and Jorgen dropped him easily, without even bothering to dismount. As he swung his leg over the saddle, and began to walk towards the crippled lorry, the Chimera ground to a halt a few metres away.

'Took your time,' he said, as the hatch clanged open.

'What can I say. Traffic,' Liana said, which didn't make much sense to Jorgen. So far as he could see, the streets were still deserted. She flung the truck's tailgate open, and a cascade of ration packs spilled out onto the cracked pavement. 'Looks like you were right.'

'Course I was,' Jorgen said. 'Inventories never match up to what's actually in stores. The only reason Merser's would is if he was covering something.'

Liana nodded. 'The way things are now, food's like currency on the streets. Better. Him and his ganger friends must have been making a fortune.' She paused to glare at the sergeant, who was being prised, none too gently, out of the battered cab by a couple of her provosts. 'He must have realised you'd spotted something was wrong, and sent his accomplices to keep you quiet.'

'That's how I see it,' Jorgen agreed. 'I still don't get why he wanted to keep me around, though.'

'So we could try again, you idiot!' Merser called, as he was half-dragged, half-carried towards the Chimera. 'If you told the commissar, we'd be finished!'

'Told the commissar?' Jorgen repeated, in tones of honest astonishment. 'Why would I bother him with a bit of pilfering? Everyone's at it.'

Merser's response was vocal, prolonged, and unflatteringly inaccurate about Jorgen's genealogy.

Jorgen listened impassively for a moment, before quietening him down with a well-aimed punch to the face. 'Ladies present,' he admonished, although he suspected Liana had already heard a good deal of profanity in

her line of work. Besides, he resented people trying to kill him.

‘We might need a statement,’ Liana said, after a moment, during which the power of speech seemed to have deserted her for some reason.

Jurgen shrugged, his attention already on the crippled truck. ‘You know where to find me,’ he said.

After all, he still had a bit of space left in his utility pouches, and the motorbike he’d borrowed had commodious panniers. And you never knew when a few extra ration bars might come in handy.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# THE LITTLE THINGS

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



The concourse leading to the most expensive caravanserai the orbital boasted was crowded with travellers hurrying between starship and shuttle, browsing the stalls choking the thoroughfare, or simply stopping to gawk at the blue and white world beyond the armourcrys wall curving gently away towards the docking ports.

The prospect of seeing Amberley again was always enough to put a spring in my step, even though the pleasure of her company often came at the expense of some life-threatening favour she wanted; but on this occasion she'd assured me the invitation was purely a social one.

Spotting a street vendor hawking hegantha blossoms, I purchased a bouquet and strolled into the caravanserai's wide, marble-floored atrium, where a flunky dressed like an over-elaborate lampshade assured me I was expected and directed me to 'her excellency's' suite. The name I'd been told to ask for was one of Amberley's favourite faux identities, a minor noble from a backwater world, near enough for people to have vaguely heard of, but too distant for them to know or care anything about. Though she insisted such subterfuge was essential to her Inquisitorial duties, I strongly suspected that she simply enjoyed the play-acting.

'You're early,' the young woman who opened the door greeted me. She was dressed for the street, a scarlet cape concealing the laspistol I felt holstered in the small of her back as she brushed past me. 'Boss is still in the shower.'

'I'd gathered that,' I said, enjoying the sound of the warm contralto

filtering through the wall from the balnearia. The first time I'd met Amberley she'd been masquerading as a professional chanteuse, and her voice was as enchanting as ever. 'Where are you off to?'

'Meeting the boys downside,' Zemelda said, meaning the rest of Amberley's entourage were on the planet below, if I interpreted her fractured version of Gothic correctly. 'Food's on the way up, so you won't starve.'

'Hegantha,' Amberley said, emerging from the balnearia swathed in a towel. 'You shouldn't have.'

Which meant I should, of course. One principle of battlefield survival which applies equally well to relations between the sexes is that it's the little things that matter most. A flash of reflected light betraying the position of an ambush or a narrowing of the eyes across the dinner table are both points at which it's wise to duck.

'I remembered how fond you are of them,' I said, earning a smile which boded well for the rest of the evening.

Before I could savour it to the full, a loud knock echoed from the door and Amberley's eyebrows rose.

'Impatient waiter,' she said, at a second peremptory rap. 'I'd better get something on. You know how servants like to gossip.'

The waiter seemed unusually insistent for so refined a hostelry, where polite, barely audible tapping would be more the order of the day, so I already had a strong mental image of the man I'd open the door to. As I'd expected, his livery was a little short in the sleeve, the fastenings straining to keep it closed across his chest, while the hems of his trousers sagged across his boots.

'Is there a problem?' I asked, after he'd gawked at me for an impolite number of seconds.

'Your pardon, sieur,' he said, recovering his wits at last, 'but your face seems familiar.' Well, it should do; it was on half the recruiting posters in the sector. Then he made the classic mistake of trying to play it a shade too cool. 'Have I had the pleasure of serving you before?'

'If you have, I'm sure I'd remember,' I said, 'given that you've only been a waiter for the last five minutes.'

He reacted exactly as I'd known he would, shoving the trolley hard in an attempt to ram it into my shins, but I dodged it easily, drawing my laspistol as I did so. It crossed my mind to draw the chainsword too, but that would

have made a frightful mess of Amberley's suite, which I wanted to avoid. Decorating a lady's boudoir with bits of low-life viscera is another of the little things pretty much guaranteed to annoy them.

'Get in here!' he shouted, giving up all pretence, and a couple of well-muscled thugs shouldered their way through the slowly-closing door. The first fell to an easy headshot, dropping the stubber he was brandishing, but the second managed to get off a round before I could adjust my aim. The slug whined past my head, expending itself harmlessly in a plaster cherub of quite staggering tastelessness. The ersatz waiter was fumbling inside his jacket too, so I discouraged him with a kick to the sternum that drove him, windless, to his knees, then put him to sleep with the butt of my sidearm.

Which just left the second gunman, who had me dead in his sights. I brought the laspistol around, too slowly, seeing his finger tightening on the trigger. I flinched, anticipating the impact. Then a towel snapped around his wrist, yanking it off aim in the nick of time, a dripping, fuming Amberley on the other end. I shot the fellow at once, before he could recover, reflecting that at least his last sight had been a memorable one.

'Were they after you, or me?' Amberley asked, rearranging the towel, to my vague disappointment.

'Your alias, by the look of it,' I said, after a cursory search of the not-waiter's pockets. 'They were planning to leave this ransom note for her family.'

'Could have been real,' she said, with a shrug which did interesting things to the towel's stability. 'Or it might have been a blind, and my cover's blown. We'll find out once we get this one to an interrogation suite.'

She wandered off to make the arrangements, while I started to lay out the dinner our luckless assassins had provided. She'd be hungry when she finished; and like I said, it's the little things that count.



# A MUG OF RECAFF

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



If anyone had asked Jurgen, which they never did, he would have said the operation had been a great success. As usual, Commissar Cain had outwitted the heretics they were hunting with ease, leading the squad of Guardsmen assigned to escort him straight to the heart of the coven, while the bulk of the raiding force provided a diversion by attacking the heavily-fortified stronghold of the renegades. After a short, intense firefight, most of the cabal lay dead, the few panicked survivors too intent on fleeing for their lives through the corridors of their leader's mansion to put up any further resistance.

'Went rather well, sir,' he ventured as the commissar sheathed his chainsword while making the odd little twitch of the nose he so often did. As always, Cain had made sure he was in the thick of the action, and must be in dire need of a pick-me-up by now.

Fortunately, Jurgen had noticed a kitchen during their initial assault through the servants' quarters, and was sure he could find his way back there. As soon as the commissar was engrossed in discussing how best to sweep the building for stray cultists with the sergeant in charge of the escort detail, he slipped quietly away in search of it.

The layout of the rambling house was a little confusing, but he found the object of his quest easily enough by the simple expedient of following the trail of combat damage; the path back to their entry point was marked by las-bolt pocks on the walls, many of which had charred the hanging tapestries or scored the intricate marquetry surfaces of the occasional tables

scattered about the place. Most of these had once held ceramics, few of which remained intact, particularly around the scorch marks on the carpet and the widespread cratering of walls and furniture where frag grenades had gone off.

Before long, the opulent furnishings gave way to the starker, more utilitarian environs of the servants' quarters, although Jurgen didn't expect to meet any of the staff; most of them had fled screaming as soon as the armed Guardsmen appeared, the ones that hadn't being cut down in short order alongside the masters whose corruption they'd shared.

Too seasoned a campaigner to take anything for granted, Jurgen remained alert, his lasgun held at the ready. The cultists who'd escaped retribution upstairs were almost certainly long gone, but it was always possible that a few had gone to ground, hoping to slip away quietly once the noise had stopped.

So musing, he caught sight of his objective at last, the light gleaming from neatly-shelved pots and pans visible through a half-open doorway.

He was about to walk through it when he hesitated, listening intently. Someone inside was speaking, the voice rising and falling in the unmistakable cadences of a chant.

*'Heyla, heyla sheyla, heyla sheyla, heyla hoh...'*

Jurgen had no idea what it meant, but he didn't really need to. It sounded like warpcraft to him, which boded badly for the Emperor's loyal servants still in the building. It might even inconvenience the commissar, redoubtable warrior though he was. Better put a stop to it now, he supposed. Besides, he needed the kitchen; too bad for the heretic currently occupying it.

Readying his lasgun, Jurgen dashed through the door, his eyes flicking left and right in search of a target. He'd been right, someone was practicing warpcraft: a tall, elegant man in expensive-looking robes, and far too much jewellery, was waving his arms about in time to the stream of gibberish gushing from his lips. His eyes seemed to flicker with balefire as he glanced up at the unexpected intrusion, and his mouth twisted into a grimace of distaste, as though Jurgen was something he'd just found on the sole of his shoe.

The guardsman's finger tightened on the lasgun's trigger, but before he could squeeze it the air between them ripped, sounding, he thought, like the galaxy's biggest fart. Smelled like it too. Something consisting mainly of

eyes, mouths and teeth stepped through the rent in reality and lashed out at him with half a dozen whip-like tentacles.

‘Finish the scum,’ the sorcerer said, disdain dripping from his words like protomatter from the flesh of the newly-incarnate warp-thing.

‘Works for me,’ Jurgen said, holding down the trigger of his lasgun. The daemonspawn reeled back, keening its distress, as the hail of las-bolts chewed its midsection to pieces. It was far from the first such thing Jurgen had encountered in his years of fighting at the commissar’s side, and in his experience they were never as tough as they were made out to be. Apparently that was something the Emperor had gifted him with; Inquisitor Vail had tried to explain it a couple of times, but she used a lot of long words that made his head hurt, and he didn’t really care anyway. The fact that it worked was enough for him.

After a couple more bursts from the lasgun, the warpspawn suddenly vanished, with a *pop* of imploding air, driven back to the eldritch realm from which the psyker had torn it, just as Jurgen had known it would be. He turned, taking in the rest of the kitchen in a single, rapid glance.

The psyker was still standing in front of the stove, an expression of stupefied astonishment on his face, muttering another string of arcane syllables. Livid green wychfire flared around his upraised fist, then flickered and died as Jurgen took a step towards him.

‘You can frak off and all,’ Jurgen said, and shot him, wiping the stunned expression off the man’s face with a single las-bolt. He slung the weapon as he stepped over the sorcerer’s spasming corpse, freeing his hands to pick up the kettle, which gurgled as he shook it.

Already full. That was a bit of luck. The commissar would definitely be needing a mug of recaff by now, and Jurgen meant to see that he got it.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Sandy Mitchell** is the author of a long-running series of Warhammer 40,000 novels about the Hero of the Imperium, Commissar Ciaphas Cain, as well as the audio drama *Dead In The Water*. He has also written a plethora of short stories, including 'The Last Man' in the *Sabbat Worlds* anthology, along with several novels set in the Warhammer World. He lives and works in Cambridge.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## **A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION**

*The Emperor's Finest* published in 2011.

*The Last Ditch* published in 2012.

*Old Soldiers Never Die* published in 2012.

'The Smallest Detail' published in 2012.

'The Little Things' published in 2012.

'A Mug of Recaff' published in 2012.

*The Greater Good* published in 2013.

This eBook edition published in 2018 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

Cover illustration by Vladimir Krisetskiy.

Ciaphas Cain: Saviour of the Imperium © Copyright Games Workshop Limited 2018. Ciaphas Cain: Saviour of the Imperium, GW, Games Workshop, Black Library, The Horus Heresy, The Horus Heresy Eye logo, Space Marine, 40K, Warhammer, Warhammer 40,000, the 'Aquila' Double-headed Eagle logo, and all associated logos, illustrations, images, names, creatures, races, vehicles, locations, weapons, characters, and the distinctive likenesses thereof, are either ® or TM, and/or © Games Workshop Limited, variably registered around the world.

All Rights Reserved.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-78030-937-8

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)